




*A Pride & Prejudice Memoir*

A Good Memory is  
*Unpardonable*

ALIX JAMES

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*Unpardonable*



ALIX JAMES

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*For my love,  
and  
Twenty years of the best memories*

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**T**wenty years ago today, the impossible happened.

I awoke early this morning, a thing that is not so common as it once was, and spent a pleasant half-hour gazing at the sleeping form of my husband. He is as handsome as ever—more so, perhaps, because his shockingly blue eyes are now set off by laugh lines. His hair is as thick and infuriatingly perfect as when he was seven and twenty, save for a few specks of wisdom at his temples. He speaks more softly now, especially to me, but he is still firm of thought and deed... and his “informally attired” figure is still something to behold as well.

Indeed, I am the luckiest woman alive, but it is nothing short of a miracle that we ever married. I consider it yet another minor phenomenon that we did not kill each other that first year. We are identical opposites, I sometimes say—perfectly suited in character but woefully mismatched in personality. Perhaps that is precisely why we get on so well, for he is the earth to my feet and I the light in his sky. Oh, no, I am not at all humble about our felicity, for I feel anything so dearly fought for is worth crowing about. At least a bit.

It was then, as I lovingly traced the outline of my husband’s face in the dusky morning light, that I had an inspiration.

Not one to ponder idly in my musings, I set about awakening him to inform him exactly how we were going to mark the momentous occasion of our anniversary. There is a particular way to wake Fitzwilliam when I especially want him to rouse in the best of humors, and he never fails to oblige me. Later, wrapped in his arms with my face tucked under his chin, I told him my idea.

“A memoir? Whatever for?” were his precise words.

“Why, to keep for all posterity, so that when our great-grandchildren someday wish to know how we arrived at this point, they will have the pleasure of reading all the particulars.”

“They shall have the family lineage books in the library.”

“Those dry and dusty tomes? I would rather chew wood than force

myself to read them. Besides, no one cares about who begat whom. They want to know *how* and *why*.”

“Well, the ‘how’ is a rather simple answer, and the why... I think they can figure out on their own.”

I tickled him into silence, the cheeky rascal, then I said, “Come, my love, surely we have a tale worth telling. Would you not have your descendants, who will no doubt share your... shall I say, ‘self-confidence,’ know your path to happiness?”

“If you are to throw my flaws in my face, perhaps you will not forget to mention your own impudence,” he growled... but it was a pleasant growl.

“Oh, naturally. Why, I can hardly pick up a pen without putting down something very tart indeed.”

“In that case, the thing will hardly be fit for polite company by the time we are finished writing it.”

I kissed him rather thoroughly and whispered, “I certainly hope not.”

Eventually, he did agree, though only after making me promise not to read what he has written until we have both finished. However, since he extracted that promise under duress—refer to my aforementioned reference to tickling—I do not feel particularly bound to it.

I hope our sons for generations will find our writings “useful”, and our daughters will be... enlightened.

*Elizabeth Darcy*  
*28 December 1831*

## Chapter 1

*27 November 1810*

**T**he first time I saw her, she was marrying my best friend.

I was late in arriving at the ceremony, owing to a dismal rain that created an unexpected pothole, which bent the axle of my carriage. Consequently, when at last I did arrive at that little Hertfordshire church, dripping wet and slightly out of breath, I was obliged to quietly take a seat in the back to await the arrival of the bride.

The groom, meanwhile, was fidgeting at the front. Poor Andrew, with his ruddy complexion and nervous habit of tugging at his ear whenever he was at a loss, looked nearly fit for Bedlam. I had hoped to arrive early enough to offer him some friendly reassurance to fend off his wedding nerves. Instead, I was only able to wait for him to glance my way so I might extend an encouraging look. I am taller than most, and surely head and shoulders above the old maids in front of me, but Andrew was seeing very little that morning. I doubt he noticed me, even if he did manage to send an eye around the pews.

But I saw when his gaze lit on his bride.

Ordinarily, a man ought to smile when his lady love ascends the aisle of matrimony. He should eagerly step forward to claim her hand from her father, then beam at her as if he has just obtained a prize. Andrew Bingley, however, looked as though he wanted to run. Or vomit. Or both.

I had paid little attention to the bride at this point, but now I looked at her. Her veil still frosted over her features, but her steps never faltered. If anything, she seemed to bear up with a stubborn sort of indignation—not unmerited, I warrant—and it appeared to be the bride stepping up to claim her husband rather than the reverse.

I knew this marriage was a matter of necessity for both parties. She was an imprudent choice regarding fortune, but Andrew had other



requirements, and he swore that Miss Elizabeth Bennet fulfilled them all. I could not affirm this, for all I could tell of the bride was that she had a light and pleasing figure, but Andrew did not look like a man entranced by her figure. He looked... I sighed. It would not be long now.

What the lady knew or perceived was anyone's guess, but I could not imagine she could be so repugnant to her future spouse to merit such a mixed reception as she faced at the altar that day. Certainly, she was lucky in what she was to receive by her marriage, for Andrew would see her well provided for. But I pitied her before ever seeing her face, and wondered at her feelings upon the occasion.

Her father, a man nearly old enough to be her grandfather, was quaking nearly as much as Andrew, but he did his duty and passed off her hand. He wiped rheumy eyes, kissed his daughter's veiled cheek, and surrendered her. The ceremony was concluded with dispatch, and I stood with the others to congratulate the new couple as they walked to the door.

Andrew never did remember to lift her veil.



I do not know how Fitzwilliam will tell his side of the tale, but I daresay he will fail to remember the first time we met.

I had resigned myself to marrying Andrew, for he was a tolerably decent man, by no means ungentlemanly, and he seemed quite able to withstand my irreverence. At least to a point. He needed a wife badly enough that when my Uncle Gardiner, who did business with Andrew, proposed me as an option, he offered marriage the first day we met.

I did not intend to accept, but my father had suffered a recent setback to his health, and for a short while, my mother's fears of being thrown into the hedgerows seemed quite real. So, I said yes. The engagement was not announced immediately, for my peace of mind, so I did have four weeks to become acquainted with my future husband and his family. Therefore, when I was in London before our marriage, my aunt and I often called on the Bingley sisters.

I had no illusions of winning their friendship. Rather, my intent was to assert a benevolent authority from the start, as I was younger than both of them and soon to become mistress of the household over which they had presided for far too long. They received me grudgingly, but they never poisoned the tea, which I deemed a success. Still, the only occasions I could call pleasant were when their younger brother Charles would join us for a few moments.

Charles and I got on famously, for all that he was a scatterbrained and indecisive sort. He could lighten a room merely by entering it, and he had a good heart, though I thought it would take a fierce woman to settle him down one day. I was glad it was not to be myself, but I was pleased to be gaining him as a brother.

Therefore, that afternoon when the parlor door opened, I looked up in anticipation of finally drawing a breath of fresh air in that stale room of feminine posturing. To my dismay, it was not Charles who pushed his head in the door but a great, scowling fellow with black hair and the iciest blue eyes I had ever seen.

Until that moment, I had never seen Caroline smile, but I learned that she was indeed capable of the expression. She even sounded happy to see someone, though I cannot say the sentiment was returned. "Mr. Darcy! Why, we did not know you were in town. Shame on Andrew for not informing me! I do hope you will come to dinner some evening."

I was regarding the gentleman with curiosity but little interest. He scarcely passed an eye over me. Instead, he made a stiff bow to Caroline and put himself firmly behind a chair so that she could not approach nearer. Obviously, he knew her well.

"Good morning, Miss Bingley, Miss Caroline. I was told Bingley was here."

"He is in his study," Louisa answered, "but he is sure to come in soon." She cast me a flat glance, eloquent if one knew of her distaste for me, but meaningless otherwise. "Please, may we offer you a seat and a cup of tea while you wait?"

"No, thank you. I shall seek him there. Good morning."

And that was my first introduction to the man known as Fitzwilliam Darcy.

I saw him a fortnight later at the wedding, but he never approached me. Andrew said something about the Darcy pride and a mishap with his carriage that left him bedraggled, but I was unimpressed with that excuse. Therefore, I set him down as the dullest and rudest man alive. He did little to dissuade me from that opinion.

## Chapter 2

*11 March 1811*

**T**he second time I saw her, she was wearing black.

Consumption is considered fashionable if the sufferer be a lady. It renders the complexion rosy and the constitution famously retiring—in short, all the things fools find “desirable” in a woman. Poor Andrew, however, only looked sunburnt and feverish those last months of his life. Or, so I was told.

I was regrettably away for some while—an Incident involving some rather delicate matters, which I would rather not detail here. Regardless, it meant that when I finally rejoined society, it was just in time to attend my friend’s funeral.

I called on his widow later that same day, thinking to offer my condolences and then depart for Derbyshire to indulge in my own private mourning. I expected to find a shaken young woman, daintily dabbing her eyes behind a black veil. What I found was... unconventional.

The sounds of wailing greeted me at the door. I thought surely the bereaved widow was in the arms of her family, lamenting about what would become of her and the great loss she had endured. I felt that I ought to leave her in peace, but before I could reclaim my hat from the butler, a harried young Charles Bingley rushed out of the parlor.

“Darcy! Thank God it is you. You must come and make the woman see reason.”

I sent a cautious glance over his shoulder as the feminine angst, pouring from the room, escalated to a keening howl.

“I do not feel it my proper place. I have little experience comforting the grieving and no acquaintance at all with Mrs. Bingley.”

“Not Elizabeth,” he said with an exasperated wave of his hand. “It is Louisa! She is bound and determined to marry some indolent fool

from Sussex. Andrew forbade it while he was alive, and Elizabeth is trying to discourage her now but to little effect. Louisa thinks crying will win the day, but Elizabeth is having none of it. Come, man, inject some sense into the conversation!"

I started to back away. "Surely, her family must understand best how to counsel her."

I little knew Charles Bingley, but my impression, and Andrew's own assessment of his brother, led me to think him a flighty young fellow. On this day, however, it seemed that the mantle of seriousness had settled over him at last. Becoming head of the family at age two and twenty has that effect on a man, I suppose.

Whatever it was—perhaps a new iron fixed in his eye that impressed me—I eventually permitted myself to be persuaded. He did not quite take me by the hand, but it was a close thing. The moment I stepped into the parlor, I regretted letting him work upon me.

Elizabeth Bingley was not possessed of fashionable beauty, but she was a striking creature, nonetheless. Or perhaps it was only her manner that was striking, as she stood behind a piece of furniture—a trick I had long ago perfected—and laid down her edict to a woman five years her senior.

"Louisa Bingley, it is beyond comprehension how you could consider that man. He is an utter boor and destitute besides, I shouldn't wonder. I absolutely forbid you to accept him."

Louisa, never a sweet woman, positively sneered at her sister-in-law. "Randolph Hurst is a fine man who moves in society, which is more than I can say for your parentage. An uncle in Cheapside, indeed!"

Mrs. Bingley arched a brow, noteworthy to me because I had never seen a lady so masterfully employ a look of perfect disdain. "If you choose to ignore the fact that your dowry came from the cotton mills, feel free. I, however, cannot, because your father and brother have left you more than comfortable. There is no need for you to sell yourself so cheaply on the marriage mart."

"You are a fine one to talk of 'cheap,' Eliza," Caroline Bingley snorted. "Do you not still wear that same ragged pelisse from when you were but a village eccentric in Hertfordshire?"

Mrs. Bingley puckered her rather remarkable lips and shook her head. "Believe as you choose. I shall not trouble myself to stop you, but I stand by my assertion. The man is not worthy." She had ignored my entrance until this moment, but Charles was nearly bounding and whimpering with urgency to speak, so she finally settled her gaze on us.

On me, rather.

It took me months to confess that the queasiness that suddenly

gripped my stomach was not the twisted effects of grief, nor an undercooked sausage at breakfast. It was something about *her*. Something that hummed and buzzed in my being when I finally looked her in the eye, and at the time, I had no definition for it. Now I have, but I shall explore that later in my narrative.

"Elizabeth, you remember Darcy, of course?" Charles asked.

Her eyes, dark and expressive of something I could not describe, flashed over me again, and I made her a neat bow.

"Oh, yes," she replied dismissively. "I believe you were at the wedding."

I thinned my lips in some combination of a smile and somber sympathy. "My condolences on your loss, madam."

"Yes, yes, thank you. You are very good, sir, and now I relieve you of your duty to comfort the widow. As you can see, I am quite diverted by other matters."

I straightened, a bit offended and certainly nonplussed. "I had thought to find you in an entirely different state, madam. Forgive me for intruding. I shall take my leave."

"Oh, pray do not permit your feathers to be ruffled. As you are here, you may as well make yourself useful. What is your opinion, sir, on an unequal marriage?"

On this, I had rather firm opinions, and I expressed them as eloquently as an educated and sensible man possibly could. Mrs. Bingley appeared to bristle, but I thought myself exceedingly well-spoken until Miss Bingley herself protested my lack of understanding.

"But we are not unequal, Mr. Darcy! He is a gentleman, and I am as good as a gentleman's daughter. My father's fortune may have come from cotton, but he lived as a cultured man of good breeding and educated his sons accordingly. Why, Lord Meriwether himself considered my father a friend, and Mr. Hurst is a man of fine connections and good family."

I glanced at Charles. "Is the man as she says?"

He shrugged reluctantly and sent a helpless look to his sister-in-law. "True, indeed. He is quite fashionable, with a respectable estate, but he drinks to excess and is known to keep one or two ... bad habits. He is not a pleasant man."

"I should say that the matter of his pleasantness or unpleasantness ought to be for Miss Bingley to decide. She is of proper age to determine her own future, is she not?"

Young Bingley looked squeamish, but he confessed that yes, his sister was five and twenty. At that age, and with the lady's... ahem... lack of other prospects, he had to have known how this would come out.

"If the man is willing to provide for and respect her," I continued,

“and if Miss Bingley believes her happiness will be better served as mistress of her own home, I would advise her to marry.”

Miss Caroline was swift to second my approval, and Miss Bingley shot her younger sister-in-law a smug look of triumph.

Elizabeth Bingley’s eyes were astonishing things. If a man could suffer blistering burns from a mere look, I should have spent months in bandages, for she fixed me with such displeasure and contempt that I felt my skin heating. Perhaps it was only a blush, the sort I had not endured since boyhood, but I was entirely uneasy in her presence. I had come to condole, but instead, I had made an enemy.

Bingley pressed me to stay for tea, claiming my company was a soothing balm for the grieving family, but the very air in the room belied that statement. I declined his invitation, on some lame excuse or other, and offered my sympathies once more.

Elizabeth Bingley said not another word to me, but mercifully, she left off glaring at me. I took my hat and beat a hasty retreat. I did not look forward to keeping up the acquaintance.

Fitzwilliam has his uses, but if he ever suspects how often I have

purposely disagreed with him to effect the outcome I desired, he will not receive the knowledge happily.

So, at last, I was relieved of one sister-in-law. I knew and understood Andrew's reasons for refusing the match with Hurst, and for myself, I could not but agree. The man was all but intolerable. However, Louisa had no desire for felicity in marriage. Just the marriage part suited her, and I knew this from the moment I met her.

Therefore, when she crassly decided to use the occasion of Andrew's death to further her ends, I held my line firmly. Had I agreed to her desire without a fight, she surely would have found the confrontation less appealing and might have even cried off the engagement. As it was, I would still have to live with her for at least six more months, and I felt it would be more comfortable for all if she sensed that she had carried a victory over me.

The next time I had words with Fitzwilliam was at Louisa's wedding, on the first Tuesday in September. Charles, the dear fellow, was quite lost after being thrust into his new place in life, and as I understand it, he had joined Fitzwilliam's club for the express purpose of following him like an abandoned pup.

No, that is not charitable. I did encourage my brother-in-law to seek Mr. Darcy's company and advice, and his sisters, for once, agreed with me. I think Charles was delighted, for he had few sources of male guidance, and Mr. Darcy was, if nothing else, quite accomplished at managing things. I suppose Charles could have done far worse, for at least the man was well disposed towards Charles, for his brother's sake. They were in company several times a week. Anyway, the result was that by the time Louisa marched down the aisle, Fitzwilliam Darcy had been pressed into accepting an invitation to the wedding.

It was more than an invitation, I discovered. Charles, who thinks that everyone whose company he enjoys must also like each other

passably well, had asked Fitzwilliam to escort Caroline and me to our seats while he was occupied with Louisa. Caroline was greatly in favor of this scheme. I was less so, and Fitzwilliam even less than that.

He did approach me later during the wedding breakfast, and I waited for whatever pompous thing he might have to say. "Mrs. Bingley, I fear we may have begun our acquaintance on the wrong foot. May I extend an olive branch?"

He offered me a glass of wedding punch, and I believe this was the first time I had allowed him to be quite pleasant to look upon. "Very kind of you, sir," I said as I accepted.

He stood in awkward silence for a while, and I have since learned that is usually his way around people he does not know well. He is woefully inept at forming acquaintances, and I often wonder how he managed so long without me.

"I fear I have done little to recommend myself, Mrs. Bingley," he announced abruptly.

I choked a little on my drink. We had, after all, been standing in silence together for more than five minutes when he deigned to speak. "Sorry?"

He frowned and examined his glass. "I never properly expressed my condolences on the loss of your husband."

"Ah. And I expect you did not find me suitably bereft at his passing," I guessed.

Fitzwilliam squirmed—he does that, though he will swear to the moon and stars that he does not. "Far be it from me to judge the sentiments of another."

"Oh, I do not believe you for an instant," I replied, rather pertly. "It is in all your looks, how ill my behavior sat with you that day, and you do not strike me as a man to brush off something you perceive as an insult to your friend's memory. If it brings you comfort, I did sincerely mourn my husband, but your rather untimely arrival caught me at an awkward moment."

"Let it be forgotten. Charles has taken care to inform me that he holds you in the highest esteem, and though he is a brash fellow who judges in haste and seldom repents of his mistakes, I believe his assessment of you may be rooted in fact rather than fantasy."

I laughed. "On what do you base that, Mr. Darcy?"

He swirled his glass and did not look me in the eye. "On the circumstances of your marriage and the good that is reported of you during those months."

I remember sighing as I looked out at the merry wedding party. No such felicitations had marked my wedding to Andrew. No... felicitations... at all, in fact, as he had been too ill to remain on his feet after the ceremony, and he spent most of his remaining months in



his sick bed. "You must have heard how it came about, then. My husband was... quite generous to my uncle."

"You do yourself too little credit, Mrs. Bingley. Andrew knew his years were numbered—though I do believe he thought it was to be years rather than months, and he desired a capable, intelligent wife to manage his affairs. I understand he chose well."

"Rubbish. He chose the first woman desperate enough to accept a dying man."

Fitzwilliam has this peculiar smile that he takes great care to disguise as a frown, and he bestowed it on me then. "There, you are mistaken. I know for a fact that there were other... options. One of them turned out to be already *enceinte*, while another was exposed as a fortune hunter whose father was deeply in debt."

"Ah! Then I stand corrected, for it seems I won out over a highly eligible field. How marvelous for me!"

"I only meant to illustrate that he was as discerning as he had leisure to be," Fitzwilliam answered in a tone full of starch.

"And the arrangement was to everyone's benefit, yes. My uncle got the contract with Burley Mills, Andrew 'hired' someone to govern his sisters... as well as Charles... and my mother saw a daughter married."

He pretended interest in an actual, normal conversation, like a regular person; or at least that was what I thought at the time. Perhaps it was genuine, but I doubt I shall ever know. "Have you much family in Hertfordshire?"

"Prepare yourself for something terribly shocking. I have four sisters and a mother who has once tasted success in matchmaking. There, you may consider yourself warned and retreat to a safe distance, lest I see fit to ensnare myself yet another brother."

"I am not easily caught."

"Oh! A challenge, then!"

"Others have tried and failed," he warned me, with that quirky little smile of his.

"But with *four* sisters to dispose of, each more beautiful than the last, surely the odds are in my favor. If you ever care to test your luck against mine, Mr. Darcy, I dare you to stop in Hertfordshire for a month or two."

"Do you intend to return to Hertfordshire?" he asked idly, swirling his glass again. That is another of his nervous habits.

"Now that I am in half-mourning and Louisa is married, yes. After speaking with you, Charles says he would like to try his hand at managing an estate, and my father writes that there is a fine one for lease not three miles from my family home."

"Does Miss Caroline share your enthusiasm for this removal?"

I smiled like a Cheshire Cat. "No."

His hand stopped swirling, and his eyes narrowed slightly. "Indeed."

"But she will come, regardless, because whatever she might say, she despises Hurst even more than she dislikes me. It will chafe her beyond reason that I shall be Charles's hostess and not herself, but I suppose she will rub along until another opportunity presents itself."

Fitzwilliam smiled in earnest this time and raised his glass to me. "If Charles would care for any advice as he embarks on this new venture, tell him I would be at his disposal."

"And mine?" I teased.

"Naturally."

"Very well," I declared, "let us have a private wager. Oh, nothing indelicate!" I cried when he looked scandalized. "For amusement only, and the winner will claim a forfeit of their choosing."

"What is your wager?" he asked cautiously.

"Why, that by my means, I will see one of my sisters *well* settled, of course. Let us say by Christmastide?"

"Then I shall take care not to arrive in Hertfordshire until late December."

"Foul, I say! We hope to be settled by Michelmas, and it would not be sporting of you to delay, sir."

"Very well, I will risk it. After all, I have prevailed against all the belles of the *ton*. I am confident that it will be I who claims the forfeit."

I flashed him my most impertinent smile. "I am willing to bet that country girls from Hertfordshire have something that the London debutantes do not."

"Probably mud on their skirts," he scoffed, and finished his drink. "Until Michelmas, Mrs. Bingley."

He dipped me a very proper farewell and left the breakfast shortly after that.

**T**he way Elizabeth usually tells it, I was only lured to

Hertfordshire by means of duress. She has probably written something about a wager in which she pitted her wit against my pride and felt assured of the victory. Nothing could be further from the truth. I do not doubt that she expected to foist one of her sisters off on me. She claims she was nearly successful, but I was never in any danger of falling for one of the Bennet sisters.

The simple reason is that the sister I learned to prefer was no longer a Bennet.

But there, I am getting ahead of myself. Charles—I shall hereafter call him Bingley, for the family name was now his by right—had little experience of the world beyond Eton and Cambridge. Barely graduated, he had expected a Grand Tour and a few years of leisure before assuming any sort of responsibility. I had once counseled Andrew not to keep his illness from his younger brother, but it was his judgment that sorrow deferred was sorrow foreshortened. And so, Bingley had but a few months of intelligence before he had to bury his brother and head the household.

When I arrived in Hertfordshire, I expected disorder and confusion. I was disappointed.

It was Elizabeth—ahem, Mrs. Bingley, as we were not yet on intimate terms—it was she who saw that I was received properly since Bingley was riding the perimeter of his new estate at the moment. And when I say “received properly,” I do not mean that she arrayed the servants and set out a formal tea service. I mean that she hushed everyone up and hastened me upstairs to refresh myself in peace before Miss Bingley learned of my arrival. This gesture alone fixed her firmly in my mind as a kindred spirit.

I later discovered that she had gained her wisdom in managing discreetly by surviving nineteen years with her mother. To this day, I am in awe of that feat, for my first meeting with Mrs. Bennet nearly

sent me speeding back to London.

I had not completed my bow to her before she laid claim to me for her daughters. A local Assembly was in the offing, and we were all expected to attend. Even Elizabeth, a widow in half-mourning, would make her appearance to sit on the edge of the room with the other matrons. As a bachelor, I was assured that my company in the neighborhood would be most joyously received, but not until I had promised a dance to each of the Bennet sisters—and Miss Bingley. With half my evening thus spoken for, and Bingley's as well, I expect Mrs. Bennet felt herself quite at an advantage of her neighbors.

One thing was certain. Elizabeth was correct in declaring her sisters beautiful. What she failed to inform me of was that each one possessed some fatal shortcoming.

Jane, the eldest, seemed the most likely to catch a man's interest. Firstly, there was her age, for she was two and twenty, ripe yet fresh, and full of the sort of mature sweetness one might hope to find in a prospective wife. And she did possess rather remarkable looks—golden hair and eyes so blue they were nearly violet. I confess, I did look at her two or three times, but I found her rather bland and empty-headed. Not that she lacked intelligence; she simply lacked the passion to spark her interest in anything.

I could never declare this to Elizabeth, for it became obvious at once that of all her sisters, Jane was her favorite. However, I no longer wondered why Andrew had chosen to break with convention and marry the second sister.

After Jane came Mary, and her beauty was understated, but still evident if one could entice her to look up from her book. I shall end my observations there because someday Elizabeth will read this, and I dare not describe my impressions of her sister's musical talent.

Catherine was next, and there I drew the line, for she was the same age as my "baby" sister Georgiana. And though she brushed it off with inelegant carelessness, it was all too soon apparent that she was far less sure of herself and even more willing to follow bad advice than my sister had ever been... a staggering accomplishment.

Then there was Lydia.

I shall say no more.

The only person who truly intrigued me from Longbourn was Mr. Bennet. He sat in near silence, his forehead frequently resting on his index finger as he watched the various performances of his wife and daughters. He seldom looked Elizabeth's way, but he nearly always found it necessary to remove some dust from his eye when he did.

He was an older man, possibly double his wife's years, and he had the stooped posture of one who read more than he walked. Very well, I could speak equitably with a learned man. But there was a dry sort

of bitterness in his words that I could not like. He reminded me of one of my masters at Eton—a man of brilliant mind and nearly limitless abilities, but a series of misfortunes and disappointments had made him a scant shell of a human who resorted to mocking others for his own amusement.

That was my first impression of Elizabeth's family, and it did not leave a pleasant flavor.

"Well, Mr. Darcy," she challenged me later over a rather stimulating game of chess, "which is it to be? My suggestion would be Jane, for she is ten times prettier than any of the rest of us, but you are quite free to choose for yourself."

I feigned a frown, moved my rook, and wondered what was wrong with Mrs. Bingley's mirror. "You needn't trouble yourself to push your sisters my way, as I am certain Mrs. Bennet will do the job creditably."

She placed her knight and smiled brightly. "Which is why I must pretend to be cooperating with her. But am I in earnest, or am I merely sporting with you because I enjoy provoking you?"

"If I presume the former," I replied evenly as I considered the board, "it would be no credit to you. If the latter..." I put my pawn in her way, drawing a knowing smile... "it would be no credit to myself."

"Come, Darcy, do you two mean to play all night?" Bingley protested from his stance by the hearth. "I never understood why people enjoy that tiresome game."

"Mr. Darcy was a champion at Cambridge," Miss Bingley informed him archly. "You ought to try it, Charles, for I always say the mark of a true gentleman is in his pursuits."

Elizabeth's mouth twitched as she claimed my pawn. "Is that true, Mr. Darcy?"

"Is what true? That I was captain of the Chess Club, or that it is the pursuit of a gentleman?"

"The latter, for you would have denied the former out of hand if it were an exaggeration."

"Then I shall deny the latter." I made my move and enjoyed to the fullest the expression of awe in her chocolate-colored eyes when she saw why I had sacrificed my pawn. "Anyone can play a game. A gentleman makes an art of it."

"It is only a pity there is no one available to match your skill, Mr. Darcy," Miss Bingley interjected. I did not miss the pointed look that passed between the sisters by law, but Elizabeth, to her credit, smiled sweetly in the face of the other's scorn.

"Indeed, it is a pity. I hope my humble abilities are sufficient to provide an hour or two of amusement, but I am under no illusions about my prowess."

I captured her knight, and set it aside with care. "Consider me

vastly amused, Mrs. Bingley.”

She pursed her lips and tilted her head. “That is all well and good, but you miss the entire reason I agreed to the match in the first place.”

“So you could make use of your captive audience to extol the fine qualities of your sisters?” I asked mildly.

“You know, Mr. Darcy, you are not half as thick as you look.”

“Oh, do not be fooled, madam. I am quite inflexibly thick when I set my mind to it.”

I think my favorite way of meditating on Elizabeth’s face is with that quirk to her brow—playful and clever or thoughtful and cool, that same look can convey a thousand moods. She favored me with it again, and that was the first time I felt my grip on my heart slipping.

“And what have you set your mind to at the moment, if I may ask?”

“I was thinking of asking one of them to play a game of chess.”

“Chess? Now there is a fine picture!” Miss Bingley snorted.

Dash it all, I had nearly forgot she was listening, and she looked none too pleased about my continued presence at the chess table while she waited on the sofa.

“Miss Kitty, or Miss Lydia, trying to hold two thoughts in their heads is quite outlandish enough, but to try to match you! Oh, no, Mr. Darcy, it would be humiliating to yourself, even if they do not share the capacity for shame.”

For the first time, I noticed that Elizabeth’s cheek was flinching. Her jaw was tight, her eyes hard, and her nostrils fluttering with anger. But she refused to allow Miss Bingley to goad her. I understood then that this must have been a regular thing between them, and to my dismay, Bingley scarcely noticed.

There was nothing to be done by me, however, save to play along with the innocent party. I folded my arms and returned a sage look for Miss Bingley’s acerbity. “As a matter of fact, I do have my opponent chosen, and I have no doubt it will prove interesting. I believe I will challenge Mr. Bennet.”

Elizabeth rewarded me with a grateful smile. I remember that most of all, above anything else that happened all that week. I had come to the house as a near stranger to her, and now, I had won a friend.

I had few true friends in life. Perhaps it was because I was so cautious in the choosing of my inner circles, and the loss of Andrew had been a devastating blow that Charles could never make up. His widow, however, was beginning to step slowly and inexorably into that wounded hole.

It was a pity I had to beat her at chess.

I know by now when and where Fitzwilliam is penning his portion

of our memoirs because I caught him acting very suspiciously when I awoke this morning. He was speaking hurriedly, asking if I would not like to call my maid and trying to divert my gaze out the opposite window to admire the rain. As rain is no novelty this time of year, I was naturally on the alert.

When his valet invited him away for his shave, I took the liberty of peeking under the bed. Lo and behold, I found his journal. It is now my privilege to set the record straight on one or two things that he has misrepresented.

I won that game of chess.

And the one after that.

He did claim a victory over me later in the week, but I blame that on the fact that my father had sharpened his skills before our rematch. Even now, I win more often than not, and I wonder how on earth Fitzwilliam gained his reputation for being a formidable player.

Oh, and I never meant to flirt with him. It does sound like that from the way he has set it down, but I speak the truth. I had had quite enough of marriage and felt no desire to put myself in that way again, though I was perfectly content to lead others down the primrose path.

But I digress.

Fitzwilliam proved to be a willing lamb to the slaughter for all the preening mamas in Meryton. I believe that I alone appreciated the sacrifice it must have been for him, because Charles did not yet know him well enough, and neither he nor Caroline could conceive of a differing perspective to their own. I am naturally a garrulous person, but my wise aunt Gardiner once told me that a retiring character—Mary was her example, but Fitzwilliam fits the illustration perfectly—when forced into much company, would feel just as miserable as I would if locked away for days with no company at all.

And so, when Mr. Darcy would retreat to some sanctum at

Netherfield for an hour or two, I made certain that the servants did not betray his whereabouts to my brother or sister-in-law. For one thing, I liked Charles far too well to permit his boisterous personality to drive away a friend of such material usefulness. Charles had steadied remarkably in the year since I had known him, and to some degree, Fitzwilliam was responsible for it.

But watching Fitzwilliam at the Assembly later that week, gamely taking to the floor for set after set, gave me a new appreciation for him. Perhaps I was the only one by the time the dust had all settled on the dance floor, and even my approval was tested afterward.

He did escort the proper number of ladies, but he seemed little charmed. The silly dolt spoke tersely to most of them, a thing for which he was judged prideful and above his company by the Meryton Mamas, as I had taken to calling them. They did not notice how his complexion was slightly paler with each new lady he met. I think the man went half an hour at one stretch without taking a proper breath.

By the time we rode home that evening, he had run out of words entirely. Even now, comfortably married for two decades and still firmly affixed in my own mind as the giddiest fool who ever draped herself on her husband's arm, I hold to the belief that he is allotted a limited number of utterances per day. Someday, I imagine I will be bored enough to count them and settle the matter. When the quota is reached, there is nothing left but sarcasm.

So it was on the way home that night.

"I declare, I have never seen prettier girls in my life! Some of them uncommonly agreeable," Charles bubbled. "Breeding, elegance, beauty—why, Meryton is abounding in fine ladies! Do you not agree, Darcy?"

"Bingley, you continue to astonish me. I saw little beauty and no breeding at all," Fitzwilliam snapped.

I flashed him an indignant look, and he grudgingly added, "Present company excluded."

"Quite right, Mr. Darcy," Caroline purred. I absolutely hated it when she did that, and she knew it, so I tried to look the other way. "We were certainly a long way from Grosvenor Square, were we not?"

"No, no," Charles interrupted, "that will not do. I refuse to believe the location is sufficient indictment of the lovely people I met tonight to earn them my disdain. Come, Darcy, did you not see a single lady to catch your fancy?"

He slid a cautious look my way again, and I could almost see the scales in his mind upon which he was stacking his words. "I would not confess it if I had."

Charles was shaking his head. "I wouldn't be as fastidious as you for a kingdom. What about that girl you led out for the first set? Tell



me she did not take your breath away, man!"

Fitzwilliam narrowed his eyes, probably trying to recall who it was. "Apparently not."

"If you are struggling to make heads or tails of that string of mediocrity, perhaps I may be of some assistance," Caroline offered. "I believe that was the lady I asked you about. Everyone was declaring her a beauty, but I saw nothing in it and sought a gentleman's opinion. I distinctly recall what you said, for I thought it so clever!"

Fitzwilliam squirmed—do you see, I said before that was a habit of his. "There is no need to repeat—"

"Nay, let us hear it!" Charles cried.

"Yes, Mr. Darcy, do let it be heard, for it was most diverting. You said 'She, a beauty? I should have as soon called her mother a wit!'"

He cleared his throat and fidgeted with his cuff links. "It means nothing," he mumbled, with a nervous glance my way. "As a matter of fact, I do not even recall whom it was that I supposedly insulted."

Caroline snickered, and Charles looked worried. All eyes fell to me.

"Jane," I whispered. "That was Jane you danced with first."

No one spoke again.

I refused his hand out of the carriage that night. Just like I refused to let him take my wrap or see me upstairs. He must have known better than to request a chess rematch, though we both confessed later that it was many hours before we were calm enough to sleep, and the game would have done us good.

I shall save my descriptions of our reconciliations for another time because they were far too numerous and complex in those early days for me to begin on even one of them here. All I will say in this entry is that Fitzwilliam could be an arrogant brute at his worst, but he is goodness itself at his best. He has also always been... very persuasive. When he wants to be.

And now I must put away my writing because I hear my husband walking this way. Not only am I suddenly in mind for a bit of his sort of "persuasion," but I am still under the illusion that he does not know what I am doing in the hothouse. He claims no curiosity about what I am planning to write, but yesterday I caught him casually glancing in my escritoire. "For a penknife," he said. "Mine is dull."

I doubt he will ever suspect to look behind the palm bush. Just as he never thought I would look under the bed, but I maintain that mine is the more imaginative hiding place. He must have felt too exposed after this morning, however, and now I shall have to "not look" for his journal all over again.

P erhaps at this point, something ought to be said of Elizabeth's temper.

I have seldom met a woman more prepared to leap to the wrong conclusion and then to cling fast to it like a wildcat her prey. I confess, our first row was bitter and furious enough that I... oh, how this memory agonizes me to this day, for I think of how close I came to not knowing the happiness that has been mine half a lifetime now!

I left Netherfield.

In my defense, it began innocently enough. An ill-judged comment to the wrong person—Caroline Bingley, to name her—and Elizabeth came away absolutely assured that I despised her family, held her sister in contempt, and was, in general, a selfish churl who cared nothing for the feelings of others.

She was correct, sadly. But I did come to repent of it. The tale of how we arrived at that point is in some parts the stuff of family legend, and in others a matter of such treasured, private memories that I will not even share them here.

I would not have the reader conclude that my accidental insult of Elizabeth's favorite sister was sufficient to cast me out of Netherfield. She is not *quite* so hot-tempered and stubborn as that. It was the following day, when I tried to make amends without a proper apology, that I learned just how savage her devotion to her family was. And how acid her tongue could be, because no one had ever dared to call me arrogant, conceited, and the last man in the world she cared to listen to.

Young men, take note: it is not a wise tactic when trying to smooth the waters with your favored lady, to maintain yourself to be in the right, even as you declare your expectation that she should come to see the affair from your perspective. It will end sorely. To illustrate, I believe I said something about her mother's lack of decorum, her father's complete failure to govern his daughters, and her younger

sisters' indecent behavior concerning gentlemen.

It did not matter that I was right at each point. In fact, in later years, she came to agree with me in nearly every particular (though she has taught me to love them despite their flaws, as she does). What mattered was the harshness of my manner, my absolute inflexibility in declaring my opinion the superior one, and my failure to see both the tears starting in her eyes and her hand raising to slap me soundly.

I departed for London half an hour later.

I returned in less than a fortnight, hat in hand and my sister Georgiana in tow (I am not above employing whatever advantage I can when so much is at stake).

Before I describe my reception and subsequent (successful) apology, I ought to say something of Georgiana. She was left to my care upon our father's death, when she was eleven, and I was the same age as Charles Bingley. My cousin Richard shared in her guardianship on paper, but in reality, he was most often with his regiment, so she was my concern almost exclusively.

Not that I did not adore her. I would have had it no other way, but I see now how ill-equipped I was to raise her. The mistakes I made were colossal and potentially devastating. I do not exaggerate when I state that I nearly lost her, and it was only Providence that intervened when I was too blind to see my errors.

When I fled Hertfordshire that October, still nursing my bruised pride, it was Georgiana's dear face that greeted me again in London. Thus reminded of my own fallibility, it was mere days before I was resolved to right this second great wrong of mine before it, too, had the power to destroy my life.

Elizabeth consented to a private interview, out in the garden, where we could be observed but not overheard. She stood mute and aloof, poised as an offended goddess and nearly as lovely to my already appreciative eyes. I will not say that my heart had determined to claim her by then, but it was probably well on its secret way to making itself her own.

What I can surely confess is that I had come to hold her as a respected friend, one I had mortified and one whose opinion I valued. And so, I merely spread my hands, making myself vulnerable, and invited her, "Speak your grievances, madam."

Her lips parted, but no sound came forth, which was novel in my experience with her. She studied me with those matchless eyes, taking her measure of my contrition and sincerity. "You are terribly unfair, sir," she said at last.

"How so? Do you not deserve to have your say?"

"Indeed, I do, but you know perfectly well that I am at my most eloquent when I am bantering your own words back to you. Yet, here

you simply open a conversational void and expect me to fill it with insults against your character. How am I to respond without making a shrew of myself?"

"You could never be a shrew. If anyone can craft a conversation from nothing, it is you. As to my character, have I not granted you ample fodder?"

She crossed her arms. "You act as if I have been doing nothing this past fortnight but ruminating on your insults, and the first words out of my mouth will naturally be recrimination."

"Perhaps I make the mistake of assuming your sentiments are like mine, for I have thought of nothing but my offenses against you. However..." I sighed, a bit more wounded by her reluctance to attack me than I would have expected. "If leaving matters between us as they were two weeks ago does not trouble you, then perhaps I was mistaken and should simply return to London."

I turned away, my heart squeezing sharply in my chest, but a hand on my shoulder stopped me and shot my spirits into the heavens.

"Stay, Mr. Darcy."

I looked back at her downcast gaze and rosy cheeks and waited with my body pounding and tingling with hope.

She drew a shaken breath and lifted her glorious eyes. They were filled with tears.

"Elizabeth!" I whispered. It was the first time I had spoken so informally to her, and I never recanted it. Her lip quivered, and I could not help stepping close and dusting the salt tear from her cheekbone.

"Sir, I would have you know that I count you as a friend, and our disagreement truly has been a torment to me."

"The fault is mine!" I hastily cried.

"No." She shook her head. "I must claim the share of it that belongs to me. I am not normally so unreasonable."

I offered her a tight, painful grimace as an excruciating truth dawned on me. "Nor am I. It seems we are capable of bringing out the worst in each other."

"I cannot argue with that!" she laughed brokenly. "But consider this; perhaps we are more able to wound each other because we understand where the other is to be found vulnerable. I choose to believe that to be proof of profound similarity of character, rather than the opposite."

I distinctly recall that was the first warmth I had felt since before I went away. I smiled so broadly that I had trouble commanding my mouth to speak, but speak I did, and to this day, I thank God for that moment.

"I believe you must be right, Elizabeth. If you can overlook my

prideful insults, I will do my best to forget your stubborn impudence.”

She burst into a laugh so sudden and so startling to herself that she snorted—charmingly—and covered her mouth.

“Truly, Elizabeth,” I continued, laughing as well, “I would count your continued friendship the greatest honor ever bestowed on me if you will confer it.”

She sniffed back a mixture of tears and mirth and offered her hand. “I shall try not to spread any more unsavory reports of you in the neighborhood. So long as you take care to kiss my feet and kowtow whenever I enter the room.”

“And occasionally lose to you at chess?”

She grinned, and her small, sweet hand gripped mine with the strength of a friend. “Naturally.”

O ctober of that year brought a dozen new things into my life,

not all of which were welcome. Among those that I have kept and still hold dear is my friendship with Georgiana.

It did not begin auspiciously. In fact, in the first few days after she arrived at Netherfield, I confided to Charles that the girl seemed deficient in some way because she never spoke and had a perpetually haunted look to her. Caroline badgered her needlessly, though I think *her* intent was, as ever, to find some way to impress Fitzwilliam. Harassing Georgiana did not yield the outcome she desired.

After a week, Fitzwilliam was again prepared to pack up for London. This time, however, his concern was not for his own wounded pride but his sister's sensibilities. Caroline had been dogging the girl all morning, and then we saw no more of her after luncheon. Fitzwilliam had accompanied Charles out to call on the tenants, but when they returned, he disappeared above stairs. An hour later, a trembling and white Fitzwilliam Darcy found me in the library.

"Elizabeth, a word, please," he said between clenched teeth.

I set aside my book and started to rise. He waved me back to my seat, though, and proceeded to pace a hole in the carpet. After much sighing and fretting, covering his mouth and hyperventilating, at last, he turned to face me. "You can be in no doubts about what I have come to say."

My eyes darted to the side as I tried to imagine what it could be, and I frowned. "Indeed, I have no idea."

He pulled back his lips from his perfect teeth—everything about Fitzwilliam's looks is perfect, to my chagrin—and stalked closer. "Georgiana is weeping disconsolately and begging me to take her home."

I remember the dismay with which I heard this statement. Weeping? For what possible reason?

"I... do not understand," I wheezed at last.

He paced again, and this was one of my first introductions to his mannerisms when truly vexed. He ploughed his fingers through that... ahem... gorgeous, dark, thick, curly hair of his... and hissed as he breathed. "I brought her here," he bit out, "because I believed you might be a friend to her."

I laid my hands in my lap and was helpless to keep my fingers from twisting together. Never mind that he had brought her uninvited. He adores her, we had all welcomed her and desired her happiness, so that was the end of it. Even if he was presently acting as if *he* were the host and *I* was the rude guest.

"I am perfectly willing to befriend her, but she will hardly speak to me. It is not for lack of effort on my part."

"Come, Elizabeth, you are too intelligent to miss the fear in her eyes. I thought *you*, of all people, could find some sympathy for a girl desperately in need of feminine companionship."

"I am not without sympathy," I retorted, "but I do not understand the need or the means. What is Miss Darcy's impediment that she finds it impossible to return any overtures of friendship?"

"Impediment! She has no such thing."

I lifted my brow, a gesture that, since the early days of our acquaintance, has seldom failed to bring him round.

"Oh, very well," he sighed. "Forgive me for losing my temper. It is not your fault. Georgiana had always been painfully shy, and in addition to that, she has recently suffered a... a dreadful scare. She misjudged someone and now lives in terror of trusting anyone else."

"If this be the case, perhaps you ought to have said as much sooner."

"How should I, without humiliating her further?"

I thinned my lips. "A private word would have gone far. I thought we understood each other well enough that even a discreet indication that some extra care was wanted could be sufficient."

He circled the room again, avoiding my gaze. "I thought there was no need."

"Fitzwilliam." I rose and approached, drawing him sharply around.

His chest rose and fell, and his eyes lit peculiarly. "That is the first time you have called me by my name."

"Because I meant to get your attention. Do I have it?"

He nodded, his mouth softening into an almost foolish smile.

"Good. I am honored, truly honored, that you could have such high expectations of me. And I am similarly flattered that you thought *I*, whom you have known but a little while, ought to be the friend you sought for your sister. I will make an extra effort where Georgiana is concerned. She is a sweet girl, and I do hope to know her better. Still, it was probably ill-advised of you to bring her *here*, where Caroline is

free to make her uncomfortable.”

He grinned sheepishly at this. “I was depending on your cleverness to shield her somewhat.”

“Well, that was bold of you! I shall do my best to befriend and encourage her, though. I can certainly appreciate what you were trying to do.”

“Well...” He cleared his throat. “Not *all* that I was trying to do.”

“What else was there?”

The side of his mouth twisted up. “I was also trying to get a particular lady to talk to me again and thought surely, if I brought my sister all the way from London, she would not be so rude as to send us both packing without hearing me out.”

My jaw dropped. “Why, Fitzwilliam Darcy, you are a manipulative sneak!”

“It worked, did it not? Would you have accompanied me to the garden if my sister had not required a rest and some refreshment after stepping down from the carriage?”

“Do not claim the credit of that. I *decided* to talk to you.”

“Only out of pity.”

I stuck out my chin. “Not at all. You bringing Georgiana had nothing to do with me hearing you out.”

“I assure you, it did.”

“Did not.”

He grinned confidently. “Suit yourself.”

“I will, for I had a reason of my own for agreeing to meet with you.”

“You could not stay away?”

I snorted and put up a hand, pretending to walk off. “If that is what you have persuaded yourself.”

“Come, Elizabeth, let me hear it! We have traded enough insults and are still on speaking terms. Surely, I may tease you as you do me.”

I tipped him a saucy glance over my shoulder. “Very well. I thought it would be difficult for Jane to catch your eye if you were not about to be caught. After all, I still have a wager to win before the end of the Christmas season.”



I have written very little of the Bennet family since my first impressions of them. It would, therefore, be easy to assume that I had little exposure to them, but that is far from the case. Mrs. Bennet seemed to think of Netherfield as nearly her own home, as her daughter was in residence as its hostess. She called nearly every day, and never without at least two more daughters—one for Bingley and one for me, I imagine.

Mr. Bennet frequently came as well, but he confined his visits to the library. Sometimes he only wished to borrow a book, but once he discovered that his shelves at Longbourn were better stocked, he would bring his own book and lapse into a near-comatose state in a sunny corner. Occasionally, I would flee the drawing-room and its occupants by challenging him to a chess game, but no matter his occupation, he seldom left the library when he came.

Mrs. Bennet was less discreet. No room in the house was safe from her purview, and at first, I wondered at Elizabeth permitting her mother so much freedom in what was rightly her domain. She would allow her mother to take her and her sisters all through the kitchens, the washroom, still room, even the hen coop, while Mrs. Bennet surveyed and admonished her daughter on the proper keeping of the house.

It made no sense to me because Elizabeth usually had no trouble holding her own when someone got high-handed with her (usually me). Moreover, she was an exemplary mistress, despite her less than stellar pedigree and minimal early training. (She will make me pay for that remark, but I will enjoy making it up to her.) However, I never saw anything amiss, and the help all obeyed her without question. I think they were privately thanking their stars that Miss Bingley was not their mistress. Whatever her magic, Elizabeth certainly needed no advice from her mother.

Then, one day by sheer luck, I discovered her design.

There was yet another person who now came from Longbourn when they called. He was a distant cousin of Mr. Bennet, and it was to him the estate would fall upon the latter's decease. Collins was his name, and Elizabeth could not abide him. Neither could I, particularly when he took care to remind me almost daily that he had been awarded his curacy by my least agreeable aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

It seemed the rest of the family thought little of him as well, but they had not the luxury of sending him away at night as we at Netherfield could. The ladies usually abandoned him as soon as they arrived, and he always found some other way of making himself a nuisance. I was at my leisure one afternoon, unaware that the Bennets were calling, and I happened to walk by the music room, looking for Georgiana.

Oh, very well, I was looking for Elizabeth. But she was most often found with my sister, having sworn me a vow to be a friend to her, and then faithfully upholding it. Even Miss Bingley was beginning to see the futility of wedging between them, for they had become nearly inseparable. But that detail matters little, for it was neither of them I found.

Jane Bennet had made the mistake of straying from her family party, wherever they had gone. And, for whatever reason, I later learned that Mr. Collins had left off harassing Bingley in the billiards room. When I looked in, Miss Bennet was seated on a divan, her scarlet face averted, and Collins was half-kneeling before her. Both started in surprise at my entry.

"Oh. Excuse me," I said, slowly backing away.

"No, Mr. Darcy, there is no need for you to go!" the lady cried. "Is there, Cousin?"

Collins stood, straightening his lapels and offering me a simpering bow. "Far be it from me to deny my fair lady's wishes."

I passed a curious look over Miss Bennet and learned all I required. Elizabeth had confided to me that Collins desired to marry one of the Bennet girls. The only person in favor of the scheme was her mother, who declared Mary Bennet a proper choice for him. Apparently, he had his sights set somewhere higher, and a careful inspection of the eldest sister's countenance informed my next actions. I could do no less for my friend Elizabeth than to protect her sister as she had mine.

"Ah, Collins, I was hoping to find you," I lied. I never lied, but for this one, I meant to extract payment from a grateful lady someday.

He flushed with pride. "Indeed, sir! Naturally, Mr. Darcy, I am ever at your disposal." In truth, he said a good deal more than that, but my stomach cannot withstand the retelling of it all in my own journal, so I shall leave the rest to the reader's imagination.

I invented some tale about seeking spiritual guidance and escorted him from the room. We passed by Bingley as we walked out, and I made a gesture that only he saw, asking him to look in on Miss Bennet after our departure. His eyes brightened like a dratted puppy, but I suppose he had his reasons for it. He had all the pleasure that afternoon, for I suffered over an hour for my gallant deed.

However, the last laugh was to be mine.

It was later that evening, after dinner and music and port. The Bennet party were long gone, and the ladies had retired upstairs. Bingley was poking the fire, his face glowing from more than the warmth of the flames. "She is an angel," he sighed at last.

I did not need to ask whom he meant.

"You would do better not to marry so soon," I advised him.

"That is just what Elizabeth says. I thought she would hope for me to court her sister, but she keeps telling me to settle into my new role for a year or two before I look around."

"I confess myself surprised, but I agree with her. I would hate to see you make an impulsive choice that you will later regret."

"How could I regret it? Through Elizabeth, I know Miss Bennet's character is trustworthy and everything I could want. We get on easily, and I am never so comfortable around any lady as I am with her."

"Bingley, you have often come to me for advice. I like to think the reason is not merely because I was Andrew's friend."

"Of course not. No, Darcy, I should always value your opinion, for your wisdom and experience are so much greater than mine."

"Then do not rush to the altar unless you are sure of your own hopes and secure of the lady's affections. Yours is not a character that will be suited by a wife who desires only your fortune or protection."

He nodded thoughtfully. "What you say is true, but I believe Miss Bennet is genuine. It is true, she is very modest, but does it not seem that she prefers me?"

"If I knew less of her than I do, I would say that hers was a heart not easily touched. However, this afternoon I was able to see her reactions to a man who does not please her, and you receive decidedly different treatment from her."

"I thought so! Yes, she is the right sort to suit me. As far as my sister-in-law goes, I do not see why she would advise me to wait. If I did not know better, I would think she found me not good enough for Miss Bennet. But would not Elizabeth be best pleased if the woman I chose was her dearest sister?"

I sighed and shook my head. "There, you make the mistake of choosing your bride to suit others. Your sister-in-law may well marry again someday and leave you. Have you considered that?"

He paled slightly. "No, I had not. Why, I suppose it is true that she is still quite young. Some man will no doubt find her widow's portion and looks too appealing to ignore, but... no, I had quite come to depend on her these last months. I had not thought she would marry again."

"I suggest you assume it as a probability. It is time for you to become your own man, Bingley."

He turned back to the fire, his brow furrowed. For once, he did not try to laugh off my more serious tone, and I fancy he took my words to heart as he seldom did.

I decided to leave him to his musings and informed him that I meant to retire. I had not got three steps from the room when a hand shot out to catch my cravat and dragged me aside.

"Elizabeth?" I gasped in astonishment.

Or, that is what I meant to say. I think I truly only got out the first syllable before she shut my mouth with a firm, and not at all friendly, kiss. My head might well have exploded for all the good it did me. Like a sheep-brained idiot, I just stood there, my body rigid, my eyes wide, and my arms limp as she plied my lips with her sweet mouth.

When she released me, my knees were jelly, and my heart had puddled somewhere below my spleen. She, however, seemed magnificently unaffected, standing there with a serene smile and her hands folded innocently before her.

"What was that for?"

I think I got those words out. I probably sounded somewhat less articulate than that. Actually, I might have only barked out a startled, sputtering sound.

"A simple thank you, that is all."

I coughed. "For what?"

She lifted her hand to tick off her fingers. "For preventing Jane from becoming accidentally engaged to Mr. Collins. For keeping him occupied for better than an hour so I could be less on my guard for my sisters for a bit. For advising Charles like a true friend this evening—yes, I overheard—and for not insulting anyone all day."

I was fumbling with my cravat, trying to loosen the knot she had choked down on my neck so I could breathe properly. "Do I often insult people?"

"Not so much anymore," she replied, with a thoughtful tilt of her head. "In fact, I think it has been more than a fortnight."

I raised a brow. "So, do I get a kiss for each of those days, too?"

She swatted my chest. "Do not get greedy, you. That was only a gesture between friends, and you know it."

"In that case, why does Charles not kiss me, too? I think he owes me more than you do."

“Shall I call him out here?”

“No!” I almost yelped. I had no doubt she would do it. “Another from you would suffice.”

She set a hand on her hip. “The very idea! I am not the sort of widow who is free with her favors, Fitzwilliam.”

“But you just kissed me!” I protested. “What am I to make of that?”

“That?” She waved. “Nothing at all, I promise. Merely a sign of my gratitude. Next time I will simply bring you a brandy, and that will be the end of it. Honestly, I’d no notion you would make a fuss over a little thing like that. I thought society gentleman received far more liberal favors for even less cause than a heartfelt thanks.”

“Of course, but not from ‘ladies.’ Not unless they mean something else by it.”

“Well, then! I shall take care not to offend you again.”

I cleared my throat. “I was not precisely offended.”

She smiled, and my heart was mush all over again. “Good. I would hate to run you off when you are such a useful fellow. Good night, Fitzwilliam.”

I stood... wobbled, actually... watching her leave. That was the moment I decided to look for ways to inspire her gratitude daily.

I did not kiss him first.

For the record, my husband carelessly left his journal open on the writing desk in my bedroom. How was I to help seeing what he had written? I suppose I ought to have expected him to assert that outlandish claim on paper because he tries to hold it over me in our private moments as well. Here is how it truly took place.

I did happen to be passing by the drawing-room with a book from the library when he withdrew that night. And I *was* eternally grateful to him because Jane told me how Collins had cornered her, and she was in mortal fear of being compromised or simply losing her nerve and caving to his proposal. So yes, I *could* have kissed almost anyone for stepping in as Fitzwilliam did.

I stopped him and said as much. I have mentioned one or two of his more unique expressions, and that night he used yet another of them on me. This is the one I call his “cat-got-into-the-cream” look, and he is unfairly good at it. I think he practices in his mirror. He let loose that smile and asked me what I would do to prove my gratitude, so I pecked him on the cheek like I used to do for Charles or my father, and went to bed. No more. That business about me pulling him by the cravat is pure masculine fantasy.

That fact settled for posterity, I must now detail something that I would rather not recall. Indeed, the beginning of November that year opened a season of all our lives that is still painful to all concerned, but without this bit of the narrative, Fitzwilliam and I never would have come to be.

Ah, yes, he claims otherwise. To hear him talk, he was smitten with me almost from the start, and I was head over ears for him even before that. But I was not naive to the ways of the world by that point. For all my teasing that he would eventually oblige me by marrying one of my sisters, I knew very well that the Darcys moved in different circles than the Bennets of Hertfordshire, or even the Bingleys, with

their fashionable wealth. For him to truly permit himself to form an attachment to me, something drastic had to rattle his pride and upend all his expectations.

That something drastic arrived in Hertfordshire the first week of November 1811, wearing a lieutenant's uniform and answering to the name of George Wickham.

The militia had come to Meryton for the winter, and apart from my concerns for Kitty and Lydia, they were generally received with welcome arms. Charles and Fitzwilliam even dined with the colonel twice. My aunt Philips, whom I have so far not mentioned, hosted a party one evening. Unbeknownst to me, the officers were all invited.

We attended, even Georgiana, who had gained precipitously in confidence since her arrival. Fitzwilliam was against it, but I, to my eternal regret, persuaded him to permit her to come. Though she was not out, as my sisters were, I thought it was little more than a gathering of neighbors. Practically family.

"If you mean to encourage her, let her have a bit of freedom. How is she ever to gain any confidence if she never meets anyone?" That was my argument. The house was too small to allow for more than cards, and she would be perfectly chaperoned. She had already been in company some little with her family, but this occasion was a step toward adulthood for her.

It was the wrong step.

I discovered this within moments of our arrival. Caroline might not have had the power in the household that she felt was her due, but she was capable, at least, of making us late. Therefore, by the time we came to the house, my younger sisters had already connected themselves to a group of officers, one of whom was unknown to us.

I met him first, as Lydia seized me by the hand to make the introduction. "Here she is!" she cried triumphantly. "Lieutenant Wickham, this is my sister Elizabeth Bingley who was married last year and is a widow now with a fortune to her name and still quite pretty enough to marry again."

Lydia was never known for even the most basic manners, and I hushed her in mortification. The lieutenant, to his credit, only smiled as if she had spoken properly.

He bowed and kissed my hand, with the kind of smile that would melt butter. "Mrs. Bingley, I am enchanted."

I curtsied, somewhat impatiently. "Likewise, Mr. Wickham."

"The lieutenant has just joined the regiment, have you not, Wickham? Kitty and me met him yesterday in town and he had just got his uniform. He is great friends with Lieutenant Denny, and does he not look fine in his regimentals?"

"Miss Lydia, you do me too much credit," he said with a chuckle.

"I warrant you say that to all the officers."

"Oh!" she giggled, fanning her hand coquettishly. "But you have not met the rest of her party. There is Mr. Bingley, her brother-in-law, just coming in now, and Miss Bingley—I do not think she is particularly nice, but I suppose you shall have to be introduced to her all the same." Lydia stood on her toes and brightened. "And there comes Mr. Darcy. Lizzy, how did you talk him into letting Miss Darcy come tonight?"

I was not looking directly at Mr. Wickham, but he gave such a great start that I could not help turning back to him. He had been sipping his drink and began to cough and sputter. "Did you say Darcy?"

I blinked slowly, and it was one of those moments where everything coalesces at half the natural speed. A gleam such as I had never seen kindled in Mr. Wickham's eye, but before I could wonder at it, a commotion arose from the doorway.

Georgiana had fainted. Fitzwilliam was still in the act of catching her, his features white with horror. And I saw the instant he locked eyes with Lieutenant Wickham.

It was only an instant, for, in the next heartbeat, he was glaring at me. The look in his eyes then, I shall never forget. It was fury and disgust, regret and anguish, but above all, it was a look of heart-wrenching betrayal.

We left at once, with Charles being the only one who seemed dismayed. Caroline was smirking, for she had been loath to come at all, but I think she never did quite understand why Georgiana was suddenly too indisposed to remain.

But I knew. Before Fitzwilliam ever pulled me aside later, before I heard the pain exploding in his voice for his sister, before I had a chance to beg forgiveness for all but forcing him to bring her that night...

I knew.

It was not hard to figure out. He was not a man to easily brush off the offenses of others against him, but he was also not one to allow his resentment to form easily. Something hideous had to have happened between them, and the pieces of other conversations began to click into place.

I will not write down the fearful argument we had that evening in the library after everyone else had taken themselves to bed. He was not so unreasonable as to blame me for the lieutenant's presence in the neighborhood, but he did lay at my feet the fact that I had interfered in his proper guardianship of a young, impressionable, and very fragile girl. A girl who had greater expectations in life than any "farmer's daughter," and could not afford to have her reputation



tarnished by “village gossips.” Naturally, he meant my mother and her ilk.

I made him pay for those remarks, but the damage was done. For my arrogant overstep, and for my heated, often unwise retorts in reply to his insulting wrath, he nearly did not forgive me. And I almost swore him off.

Obviously, we did settle our differences, or I would not be writing this today, but it was not immediate. Rather, it was not immediately complete. We both apologized that very night, through tears (mine) and grinding teeth (his), but he struggled to reconcile himself to that apology for many days after. It was at least a week before he could smile again and almost that long before I could forget how severely he had spoken to me.

But never once did he make plans to return early to London, nor did I wish for him to go.

Georgiana’s courage took a terrible blow. I shall not put down why her trust was so shattered by seeing one earthworm masquerading as an officer in gentle company, but the reader may employ their imagination.

Caroline, unfortunately, found a foothold there. She was most often with the girl, usually lauding her to the heavens, however insincerely, and finding new ways each day to disparage me. My credibility was further tainted by my own family’s intimacy with Lieutenant Wickham, and their persistence in inviting him to call. Therefore, my friendship with Georgiana suffered more than it ought to have. Fitzwilliam, however, did his part nobly.

I shall never forget the day he asked me to ride over to Longbourn with him. Charles came as well, of course, but poor dear Charles seemed oblivious to the grim set of Fitzwilliam’s jaw as we drove. I had begun to suspect by this time that he fancied Jane more than he had ever admired any other girl, so he probably only had thoughts of courtship on his mind.

Fitzwilliam disappeared during our call. I saw him when he quietly stepped out, met his eye just before he closed the door, and knew what he was about. Later, he confessed it all to me.

“I had a word with your father today.”

“I know.”

He paced, his chest tight against his buttons because he was holding his breath. He always does that when he has something important to say. He was gesturing thoughtfully with a brandy glass, then set it on a table and faced me. “You may consider him sufficiently cautioned as regards his daughters.”

I let go the breath I was holding, for I have the same habit. “Thank you.”

“Do not thank me so swiftly. I can only caution. The governing of their behavior must come from him, and...”

“And my mother and sisters will not make it easy. I know. If there is one thing my father craves, it is ease in his old age.” I sighed and fingered the fringe of my sleeve because it made my cheeks hot to look at him. I *have* mentioned how easy he is to look at, I believe? But it was quite difficult when I felt how justly he might have cause to look down on me.

“Thank you for trying, anyway. Not that my father is one to gossip, but you exposed yourself for that. You did not have to.”

“I did.” He came round the room to face me and took my hand in his. “For you, I did. I protect my friends, Elizabeth.”

Yes, dear reader, that was the moment I fell for him. I thought nothing could come of it, and still fought that confession for many weeks, but that was the point where it all turned. I laid my other hand on his cheek and smiled at him.

There was nothing romantic in it, although it may sound as if I tried to seduce him. It was nothing of the kind. We said nothing more of import to each other that night, but we did exchange an... understanding, if you will. One that has endured to this day.

When my bride suggested on our twentieth anniversary that

we should put down our memoirs of our life together, we agreed that we would each tell our own side of the tale, in our own words, with no consultation between us to align our recollections. I expected that our accounts would hardly differ and that we would each respect the other's privacy until the project was completed.

I underestimated her yet again.

I was writing last night in my room (though she claims it is her room since she is always there) when my delicious Elizabeth pushed my pen away and slid into my lap, wearing nothing but a... well, not properly attired. She wrapped her arms around me and seduced me thoroughly, right there at my writing desk.

I am not complaining in the least. Lucky is the man whose bride of two decades can still ignite him as my Elizabeth does me. But a curious constant I have discovered is that when a man is so effectively distracted, single-minded, and oblivious to all else—one might even use the word helpless—a woman may not necessarily be so.

My suspicions were confirmed later when I returned from dressing and discovered that the pages of my journal had been flipped enough to smudge a bit of ink in one corner. That smudge was in the shape of a fingerprint, far too small to be mine.

Very well, she sneaked a peek at my words. She may have even arranged our tryst on purpose to take advantage of me. I trust she found nothing to disagree with, for she has said nothing to me of it. She does, however, wear a very smug look today, but I choose to attribute that to her enjoyment of my ministrations last evening.

Now, then, back to my tale. In my present mood, I believe I will recommence with our second kiss—also initiated by her.

The circumstances of it were not pleasant to recall, but if there is one thing I can count on with Elizabeth, it is that she can always turn a dark hour into a treasured memory. We had been at Netherfield just

over a month when a man who had wronged and betrayed my family in indescribable ways joined the local militia, and therefore, was welcomed into the general society of the neighborhood. I will say little of him here, for he has but a small bearing on my story with Elizabeth, but there was one event worth recalling.

This man was not to be trusted anywhere young ladies were present, and Elizabeth, knowing something of his history, was concerned for her younger sisters. They possessed no discretion and had little guidance at home, so I paid a call on Mr. Bennet one afternoon to caution him.

Afterwards, I confirmed to her that the message had been relayed, and she expressed her appreciation for my efforts on her family's behalf. As if I could have done otherwise! It was only natural and just that I ought to exert myself under such circumstances, but she was correct in understanding how unpalatable the duty was to me. Though I declined to tell all my reasons for distrusting this particular officer of the militia, I surely said enough to expose myself to curiosity. It is a thing I probably would never have done were it not for the fact that for the first time in all my years, I felt that another family's honor was just as important to me as my own.

When she thanked me that night, I took her hand and said something to that effect. I still could not state with any reliability what exactly Elizabeth was to me—my friend's widow, a lady worthy of admiration... a friend in whom to confide my deepest secrets. A woman so maddeningly provoking and yet so sumptuously tempting that I wanted her with every fiber of my being, but one I could not conceive of actually having. I was too young and too thick to call my feelings love, but I was capable of comprehending how my body would respond to her nearness. I was no longer my own master in those moments.

She tightened her fingers through mine, and my heart forgot how to beat. Uncertain, I might have been, but I was already far enough gone that the sensation of her lips on mine had never stopped burning whenever she looked at me. As any red-blooded male would, I entertained visions of passion and beyond when she gazed into my eyes.

But the reality was far more tender and sacred even than I could fantasize. She caressed my cheek, her fingertips tracing lightly over my jaw. She looked up into my eyes, and something lurched inside my being. For a moment, my vanity whispered that she desired me, would welcome... something. I tipped my head a little lower, testing to see what she would do.

She lifted on her toes, brushed the hair off my brow, and kissed my forehead.

It was not precisely erotic or sensual, but it was the most intimate touch I had ever known. She lingered there—two seconds, three—and I inhaled softly of her neck. Her lips pulled away, but she stayed there, her breath tingling my skin, setting my scalp afire, as if she were not certain what to do next. My free hand had just begun to reach for her waist, and I had turned my face to nuzzle her cheek when she eased away.

“Well.” She cleared her throat. “I am to take tea early tomorrow with Mama and my aunt Philips, so...” She swiped a brandy I had been drinking off the table and downed the last swallow. “Good night, Fitzwilliam.”

Again, she left me a muddled, panting oaf, with my senses screaming and my brain seeping out through my ears. I knew what my duty was. I knew what was expected of me, the place I was meant to fill in the world and the sort of wife I would require at my side. Elizabeth fit none of the criteria I had been trained to seek.

But she fit me. *Oh*, how she fit me.

I went to my room that night dizzy and ready to tear out my hair. Did the woman want me, or did she not? Most of the time, she acted like I was a pest, albeit a “useful” one. At best, I was an unthreatening friend, someone she laughingly put up with for Charles’s sake and almost saw as yet another meddling brother.

At other times, I felt all it would take was a spark to swirl her into my arms to stay, and more than once, I entertained fantasies about what might happen in an unguarded moment.

But she was a tease by nature, and moreover, a widow with fewer social constraints than any maiden. She was free to flirt as she wished, and did not have to mean anything by it. I could never predict what she would do next, let alone interpret her reasons.

If I had been certain of her feelings, I might have been able to resolve my own. I daresay I would have come to the point sooner if I could have made sense of her. So, I decided to bring in an expert opinion. I wrote to my cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and politely asked if he could spare a fortnight to come to Hertfordshire.

**I**t was about that same time that I first met Fitzwilliam's cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam. Richard was the younger son of an earl and a genial, good-humored man. We all (by 'we,' I mean my sisters and I) thought him quite dashing with his red coat and easy smile, even if the family features were better expressed in his cousin's face.

My first meeting with him was something of a surprise. Charles and Fitzwilliam had gone hunting for the afternoon, and I had persuaded Georgiana to walk with me in the dormant rose garden. As Caroline preferred not to join us, we were quite peaceful and content. I seem to recall that we were laughing about something rather silly when a lone figure trotted up the drive and hailed us.

"Hulloa there! Have you seen a great tall fellow around here? Proudish rascal, about seven and twenty, not a patient bone in his body?"

I was squinting at this new arrival and puzzling over his words when Georgiana squealed and raced to him so abruptly that she unsettled his horse. "Richard! Oh, it is good to see you, but why are you come?"

He laughed and dismounted, then wrapped the girl in a most immoderate bear hug. "Georgie! Upon my word, you have grown since summer. Where is that great ox you call a brother?"

"Fitzwilliam sent for you?" she guessed.

"Yes, I had his letter yesterday. Said something about life or death, I was dead to him if I did not turn up post haste, I think."

I had approached by this time, and he turned to me with a gallant bow and a flourish of his hat. "But if this is the welcome I am to receive, consider me enchanted. Colonel Fitzwilliam, at your service, madam."

The colonel won us all over, even Caroline, for he was a silk-tongued rogue with noble connections. I rather liked him for his wit and goodness, and Charles, who could get on with anyone, formed an

instant brotherhood with him. By the evening meal, he had us lapping out of his hand as he told tales of battlefield heroism and the antics of his fellow officers when on leave. I think half of it was made up, and the other half exaggerated, but it made for splendid entertainment.

After supper, he coaxed me to the piano with the promise that he would turn the pages for me and lend his voice to the right song. This was quite an accomplishment on his part because I used to dislike exhibiting with Caroline and Georgiana present. I was by no means deficient in talent, though I lacked formal instruction. They, however, were exceptional, particularly Georgiana. Call it envy, call it conceit if you will, but Caroline never failed to make sure I felt it.

Still, I could not resist the colonel, and to this day, I do not recall when or with whom I have had better enjoyment at the pianoforte. Not that I do not love it when Fitzwilliam plays and sings with me, but his is not a character that relishes performing. He would far rather watch in silence and let others have the limelight.

But Richard made everything gay and joyous. Even when the other ladies took their turns, I could not help but to sing and clap and join the merriment from my seat. My sides ached from laughter that night and almost every other night during his stay.

My sisters were even more frequent guests while the colonel remained at Netherfield. I thought once or twice I would have to peel Lydia off him, but he bore it all with good cheer. Much as I adore my sisters, however, some of my favorite memories were our evenings in. Charles had the notion of inviting Jane to stay with us for a week to make an even table, for Fitzwilliam deemed Georgiana yet too young to join in all our amusements, and this time, I did not try to disagree. Therefore, for a string of late evenings, it was the six of us at cards or parlor games or whatever took our fancy.

One evening, Georgiana played a reel for us before she retired for the night. It was Fitzwilliam's idea to make a dance of it, to my utter astonishment. I thought at first he was mocking me when he stood and offered his hand, for his countenance was strangely off-color. I had been bouncing my knees and probably making a fool of myself as we all listened, and the last thing I could bear was to let him see me behaving in an even more undignified manner.

"No, no," I said, "you may despise my taste well enough from here."

The colonel laughed it off as a good joke, but Caroline was swift to rise to her feet and take Fitzwilliam's offered hand. He bowed politely and led her through the steps of the lively tune with more spring in his step than I would have expected of such a serious fellow. Before long, Charles had coaxed Jane to the middle of the room, and the colonel came for my hand.

“We cannot let them have all the fun, can we, Mrs. Bingley?”

Naturally, I could not refuse by this time, but I was wishing most ardently that I had accepted Fitzwilliam when he first asked me. It never occurred to me that Fitzwilliam Darcy, the most fastidious man I knew, could have been serious.

It was queer, that burning sensation in the pit of my stomach as I watched him with Caroline. I did not think he was interested in her, but he was certainly permitting her a number of liberties in the way she touched him, pressed against his side, and gazed adoringly into his eyes. He could do worse on the marriage mart. Caroline had a dowry of twenty thousand pounds, no mere trifle. And she was elegant, in a way I never could be. That I found her tiresome and insincere was beside the point—she would make someone a desirable match someday. If she could ever catch someone she deemed worth catching, and she seemed to have found him in Fitzwilliam Darcy.

The idea saddened me beyond reason. I am not certain what it was that night—a little too much wine, the heady hangover of good company when one is too weary to enjoy them fully, or a growing unrest with my own jumbled feelings regarding Fitzwilliam, but I became oddly emotional. Caroline petted his strong chest, and he swept an arm around her, cradling her shoulders and holding her by the waist, and I nearly choked. Of course, it was just a dance, but it seemed like a good deal more that night.

There was nothing for it. I am not formed for ill humor, and I have never processed sorrow or jealousy well. And so, I laughed instead. I smiled at the colonel, I murmured little jokes and jests to him as we twirled, I fixed my eyes only on him so I would not have to watch the other couple. In short, I flirted as I had seldom done in my life. And later, I went upstairs and wept myself into confused exhaustion.

The colonel stayed with us for nearly three weeks. Perhaps it was presumptuous of Fitzwilliam to have invited him, but Charles was always eager to welcome a new friend, and I have never stood on formalities. We enjoyed his company and even asked him to stay longer than his original plan. I suspected, however, that the reason for his arrival was not merely our amusement.

Since the incident at my aunt's home with Mr. Wickham, we had curtailed our outings. Of course, Charles and Caroline were never privy to all the reasons for it, but it was known to them that George Wickham was no friend of the Darcys. Fitzwilliam informed us that the man's father had been his father's steward and that the son had been provided for in the late Mr. Darcy's will. He had proved a disappointment; moreover, had disdained the legacy appointed for him (a curacy), and demanded money instead. All ties were severed, and that was sufficient to explain why the family desired no contact



with the handsome lieutenant who had charmed the neighborhood.

I, however, had begun to wonder if the colonel had business with the lieutenant. He never said as much, but on two occasions, I encountered him returning from town, very much out of humor. And once, when I took myself to the library for a midnight book, I passed the colonel's door and heard the echo of serious masculine voices.

It was not my proper place to ask, nor even to allow that I had noticed anything curious, so I never spoke a word of my suspicions. However, no matter my own confused and fraught feelings for the gentleman, Fitzwilliam had become a cherished member of our little circle, though he and I did have our occasional clashes. He thought too well of himself by half, but I had come to feel... a great deal for him, even if I could not define it. I was grateful to see that he possessed at least one confidant who had both the power to play the friend in need, and also refused to take him too seriously.

Richard was my nearest cousin on my mother's side, and consequently, we had grown close as boys. Two years older than I, he was my opposite in nearly every way: loquacious where I was reserved, adventurous where I was cautious, and insightful in areas where I, admittedly, can be a bit oblivious. Elizabeth has teased that between us, we make one tolerably good sort of man.

I knew he would be just the man to encourage my reckless suit of a woman who was, in the eyes of the rest of the world, perfectly unsuitable. The way I had it in my head, he would be half in love with her within an hour of meeting her and would drag me to my room later with the threat of marrying her himself if I did not get on with it.

Therefore, I thought it must have been a dream, or perhaps a nightmare, when he finally gave me his impressions. He had been at Netherfield about a week by that time. We were enjoying a late night drink in his room, as we did quite often, and he was prowling about the floor.

"Do you know that Wickham has run up debts against all the local shopkeepers?"

"I am not surprised," I answered.

"And there are rumors of misbehavior with some of their daughters, too."

"I warrant he is not the only officer who could be accused of that."

"So? You do not mean to do something about him?"

"I have done something," I confessed, then I frowned. "Perhaps not enough, but I do not believe he will find any heiresses here to carry off."

Richard sank into his chair. "Shall I have another chat with Colonel Forster? Keep a closer watch on the bounder?"

I lifted my shoulder. "It could not hurt if done discreetly. If you are thinking of something more drastic, kindly forget about it. It would only start rumors."

“Then you had better do something about him yourself. I do not like him being so close. Let me take Georgiana back to London if you are worried about her, but his perfidy must be exposed. What other wrong has he been up to that you have the power to prevent?”

That stung, because he was right, and I knew it. I had been paralyzed by fear of what might be said if I took some public action against Wickham. My sense of dignity and my violent distaste for involving myself in anything so infamous warred with my sense of honor. Indeed, I did have a duty, for all my history with Wickham put me in the position of the best person to curtail his wrongdoing.

“Very well,” I agreed heavily. “I will consider what is to be done.”

“About bloody time. Let me know if I need to arrange transport to Australia,” he grumbled. He made a face, then lifted his drink and fell silent.

I refilled my drink, then paced the room, trying to work up to what I had really meant to ask him. “Well,” I demanded after a few tense moments, “what... what do you think of Mrs. Bingley?”

He tipped back in his chair and sighed. “I wondered if she was the reason you summoned me here so urgently. You will not let me meet Wickham in a dark alley, and there seems to be nothing particularly wrong with Georgiana, so it must have something to do with that vivacious young widow.”

“Is it not obvious?”

“On your side, at least.”

I jerked straighter. “What does that mean?”

Richard grinned lazily and put up his feet on an ottoman. “Darcy, I have known you since you were in leading strings. I have watched countless women parade before you, from the time you were old enough to know what to do with a woman. Never have you tolerated half the impertinences that woman dishes out, and all with a smile on your face.”

“You make me sound rather the fool,” I replied a little stiffly.

He shrugged.

“I shall not accept your summation. She is not rude or cruel—rather, she is probably the kindest woman of my acquaintance. Her impertinence is a part of her charm. How can you, of all people, fail to appreciate her liveliness, her sense of humor, and her cleverness?”

“Oh, I most certainly do. No, no, make no mistake. Your Mrs. Bingley is quite fetching.”

I eyed him suspiciously. “But?”

He crossed his feet and then crossed them the other way. “Darcy, you do not need me to tell you how she will be received in Society.”

“No, but I rather thought you would be telling me that it mattered only to my own vanity. That the rest of the world could go hang, for I

never cared to claw my way to the top of the social heap. Georgiana's dowry is sufficient to attract plenty of gentlemen from whom to choose. The earl and countess will be disappointed but not devastated, and Lady Catherine will be displeased no matter what woman I marry, for it will not be her daughter."

"So, why do you need me? It sounds as if you have it all worked out."

"What are you not telling me, Richard?"

He frowned and lifted his brows. "I only hope she will make you happy."

"Well, that is just the trouble. I cannot seem to sort..."

"How you feel about her, or the reverse?"

"Both." I sighed and got to my feet, then began to pace. "She is... she is... Well, I... When I am with her, I..." I turned around, my hand suspended in the air and my mouth hanging stupidly. I could not think how to form the words.

"She thrills you. Terrifies you and excites you and makes you feel things you never knew you could feel."

"Yes," I breathed. "Yes, that is it exactly. How did you know?"

"It is all over your face, even now. Honestly, Darcy, I have never seen you like this. You are out of your head over the woman, and you are looking for permission to do something about it."

"I do not need your permission," I scoffed.

"No, you need your own. If you are determined to have her, if you think she will please you, then do as you like."

I resumed my seat and crouched forward. "You do not seem as encouraging as I expected. What misgivings have you not told me?"

"Misgivings? I would not use such a strong word. You must marry someone eventually, and it may as well be a woman you find attractive. Goodness knows how many marriages are pure business, so you should count yourself fortunate that in this case, one of you, at least, knows what it is to love."

I blinked. "Do you mean she does not appear to care for me?"

"Oh, I think she does, but whether it is a particular kind of attachment is impossible for me to say. Indeed, she teases and flirts with you, but from what I can see, that is simply her way. Is she any different with other men of her acquaintance?"

"Naturally! She is not immodest. Nor does she have a desperate need to marry again. I have never seen her show particular regard to anyone else."

"And what about me?" He puckered his lips and raised a brow.

"You are always a favorite with the ladies. Of course she likes you." *A little too well, perhaps, judging by those musical performances.*

"Darcy, I have been watching her carefully, and to be quite honest,

I see very little difference in the ways she behaves with you versus me.”

This statement hit my stomach like a stone. Or a death knell. I was spiraling, grasping at contradictions—anything, to prove him wrong. “That is absurd. You were flirting with her, as well! What was she to do, ignore you? Besides, it would be only natural for her to wish to make a good impression on my family.”

“Ah, yes. I had a pretty friendly chat with her this afternoon.”

“And?”

“Oh, she told me all manner of things about the people hereabouts. Colonel Forster, her uncle Philips, her sister’s cat and her father’s book room and how her cousin Collins tried to offer for every sister in the Bennet family, on down the line, until he ran out of Bennets and had to apply to a Miss Lucas. Ah, and she thinks you are too proud for your own good.”

Fire sickened my insides, and cold sweat beaded my brow. “She... she did not say that.”

“My life on it, she did. She’s right, of course, but no man likes to think his lady feels that about him.”

“Are you certain she was serious?” I heard myself ask. “It sounds like something she would say just to provoke me. She does enjoy professing opinions that are not her own.”

“I’m not sure either one is a quality you ought to wish for in a wife.” He drew a long sip of his brandy and slowly shook his head. “No, Darcy, unless you have some other proof of her affections, I would have to say the attachment appears to be all on your side.”

*She kissed me.* But I did not say this to Richard. How could I speak of something so holy, so perfect and pure and... and confusing? She kissed me twice!

But she was not the first woman to kiss me, was she? How many times had females, debutantes and widows alike, secretly bestowed meaningless fripperies like that on not only me, but others as well? A whispered trifle, a lock of hair slipped into a coat pocket, and yes, even a sly kiss or two when no one was looking.

Elizabeth was not like that, though. She would never. She had not been raised among the careless elite, for whom a slight indiscretion, perhaps on a balcony at a party, was merely winked at and hushed up. She had only her simple virtue, and if she kissed me, even if she laughed it off later, surely she meant it. Yes, she must have.

So, I decided to stay quiet and let Richard keep watching for himself. He would see.

Ten days later, he did see, and in the most mortifying way possible. I thought to put my theory to the test and put myself out in the process. I asked Elizabeth to dance a reel with me.

My throat was tight, my heart pounding, and I was sure she must have seen how excruciating this notion was to me. I despise making a spectacle of myself, but the music was lively, her toes were tapping, and I could not let the moment pass. If she would but take my hand, salvage my dignity, I would know everything I needed to know.

She laughed at me.

Instead of spinning my nimble and witty love in my arms for all the world to see, I had to bear up when Caroline Bingley rose into her place. I made no show of my disappointment, but my heart hemorrhaged that night and bled out a little more with each loathsome step. It only got worse when Elizabeth stood up with Richard, and I had the torment of watching her, working all the dazzling arts and allurements that should have been mine, upon him.

“Leave me be,” I told him later when he knocked on my door.

He did not, of course. He poked his head through the crack and gave me a sympathetic smile. “It is not so bad, Darcy. What man of your station can say his wife married him for love? I still say if you care for her enough to put up with the public censure of marrying her, then ask. She might even accept.”

“Forgive me, Cousin, but I have had enough advice for tonight.”

Richard returned to London three days later. It was all I could do not to follow him, but Georgiana had finally found some measure of peace and friendship with Elizabeth and Jane Bennet. I could not deny her that so soon. And, perhaps, I yet clung to a stubborn hope that I might find some way to either prove to Elizabeth that my heart belonged to her, or to see enough of her flaws to dislodge her from it entirely.

I think Richard saw through my design, pathetic as it was, but he was kind enough not to tease me. I owe him a king’s ransom for having the courage to tell me what I did not wish to hear and yet granting me the dignity of privacy to act without interference. Not another word passed between us about Elizabeth, because the truth was, I was already living in hell, knowing he had been right.

Fitzwilliam seemed to lapse into a sort of melancholy after his

cousin went away. He is very fond of Richard, and the tide of war was never far from our consciousness in those days. It was thought that Richard's squadron was in no danger of immediate deployment, but one never knew. I expect everyone who counted a soldier among their dear folk prepared for each farewell to be their last.

I have skimmed rather lightly over some events that were more momentous than one might be led to believe, by my treatment of them. They are not all consequential to the tale at hand, but perhaps a brief recounting will be appropriate here.

Mr. Collins remained a guest at Longbourn from the end of October until the first week of December, when he married my dear friend, Charlotte Lucas. They repaired to Kent immediately after the wedding, and all of Longbourn breathed a collective sigh of relief. Though I would miss Charlotte, I was as pleased as anyone to see them go, for I had had enough of his chasing of my unwilling sisters and his worship of his patroness, one Lady Catherine de Bourgh. He went on about her a great deal, especially in Fitzwilliam's company, for she is his aunt and a lady of great property.

Later, I would have cause to become well acquainted with the lady, but at the time, I cared little for my cousin's ominous cautions regarding my friendship with Fitzwilliam. Collins was as thick-skulled as anyone I ever knew, but somehow he must have seen something that I did not. He was forever rambling about how Fitzwilliam was destined for the finest circles, an illustrious match, and so on, and he would not cease reminding me that I ought to be pleased to settle with what I had attained by my first marriage.

Even on his wedding day, after I stood a little too near Fitzwilliam at the reception breakfast, he said, "Cousin Elizabeth, though we have not the pleasure of being more closely related by marriage, I assure you that we are by no means unconnected, and Lady Catherine would

consider it her duty to take you under her wing, as it were. I feel it incumbent upon me to remind you that she is in a position to grant such little favors and recognitions that a lady of your stature may never dream of otherwise, provided she is *pleased* by your conduct. I would advise you not to aspire to any *other* connections which are surely beyond your reach.”

I recall being thunderstruck at his audacity in suggesting that I could offend someone I did not know, whose good opinion I had no reason to care about. Naturally, I understood later, for the early days of our marriage were haunted by the spectre of Lady Catherine’s Displeasure, but at the time, I simply laughed and walked away.

Another item I have scarcely mentioned is my younger sisters’ impetuous pursuit of officers. I see now that omission was in error, so I shall attempt to remedy it. Lydia, my youngest sister, is today happily married and the content mother of five strapping sons. But she was not always so respectable. In those days, in fact, she was quite wild indeed.

It had been more than a year since I had left Longbourn as a bride, so I had the advantage of perspective when I considered my father’s management of his daughters. I was his favorite, and my only true vice had been a sharp tongue, which had already cost me much heartbreak, and which he had never bothered to correct. I was troubled when I considered what other issues he did not correct, even after Fitzwilliam’s warning about one officer in particular.

Lieutenant Wickham was not welcomed at Longbourn again, but that did not stop my sisters from seeking his company in town. It was about a week before Christmas, and I had taken the carriage into Meryton to look over some items I meant to purchase for the season. It was to be an understated affair, as technically we were all still in half-mourning, but Charles wished to celebrate his first winter as a landlord in generous fashion for the tenants. I was alone, for Jane was wanted back at Longbourn, Georgiana was painting a gift for someone—I later learned it was for me—and Caroline had declined to accompany me. I thank Heaven for that, for what I saw when I came out of the draper’s would have ruined Lydia forever, if Caroline had learned of it.

The carriage was parked in a small alley, off the main street, because I intended to shop for a while. When returning to it with a footman to carry my purchases, I happened to glance into the opposite alley, across the street, to see a familiar-looking pelisse wrapped in red-sleeved arms. The faces of the amorous parties were somewhat concealed, but not so wholly that I could not recognize my fifteen-year-old sister and Lieutenant Wickham.

My dismay cannot be put down in words. In the blink of an eye, I



saw the ruin of my remaining sisters—of Jane, who had fallen boots over petticoat for Charles, who I had finally admitted was deserving of her; of Mary, for whom virtue was nearly a religion; of Kitty, whose only hope of a respectable future was to not follow in our younger sister's footsteps. There was little I could do, short of marching across the street to break up the sordid scene, and I justly feared drawing even more attention to Lydia's indiscretion.

I stood frozen for a moment, sick and panicked, wishing to Heaven for inspiration or luck. And even as my prayers left my lips, both arrived at once.

Fitzwilliam was just departing the tavern next door. The oddity of it never struck me until later, for he drinks but sparingly and never in a public house, but there he was, all the same. He looked grim, glancing neither to the right nor the left, and set out with purposeful strides for the corner. I nearly called out to him, hoping to distract him from seeing what I could not unsee, but I was too late. In less than a second, he snapped his arm around the corner and caught Mr. Wickham by the lapels.

The latter sputtered and acted very much put out. Then Lydia started to wail. I was near enough to hear what was said, but only because I was paying attention. To my eternal gratitude, it was quite a cold day, and the streets were not crowded. No one else seemed to notice them.

"Miss Lydia," Fitzwilliam said kindly, "I do apologize for upsetting you. Please know that it was most unwillingly done, but this man is not worthy of you."

"What do you know?" Lydia harrumphed. "I have it on good authority that you cheated him out of a fortune, Mr. Darcy!"

I saw Fitzwilliam's shoulders lift in a long-suffering sigh. Then he shot a piercing glare at Mr. Wickham.

"Well, now," he stammered, "I suppose that is not... not *precisely* true, Darcy old boy." He licked his lips and looked at Lydia again. "Perhaps I did embellish here and there."

"Miss Lydia, if you would be so kind, I have business with the lieutenant here which may distress you. If you would grant us but a moment, please allow me to present you a small token of my appreciation." He extended something to her, and I saw her figure straighten. "Perhaps you would like a new winter bonnet?"

"Well!" she exclaimed. "I suppose you are not half so bad as I had thought. I will be back straightaway, of course. What of it, my dear Wickham? I think something with a bright green ribbon under my cheek would be so very jolly."

Lydia flounced away, and I stepped back around the carriage door, not desiring that she should see me and come over. I was too painfully

interested in what Fitzwilliam had to say to Mr. Wickham.

"I suppose you mean to run me out of the country," accused the unhappy lieutenant. "What took you so long, Darcy?"

"The choice of where to go is yours. I will merely provide the means."

Wickham leaned against the wall. "How do you intend to do that?"

"Your shopkeeper's debts in Meryton are paid, and I am willing to arrange for any debts of honor you have incurred while here. In exchange for this, you will repair to London immediately and present yourself to Colonel Fitzwilliam. He will handle the purchasing of a commission into the Regulars, in the available regiment of your choice."

Mr. Wickham was silent, then; "And if I refuse?"

"I will hold your debts."

The gasp of dread was audible even from where I stood. "I see. You really went out of your way this time, Darcy. Why now? I have not breathed a word about our little disagreement last year. One might think I was getting a little too close to your turf again. Is that it? I was having a bit of fun with that Bennet chit, and you have your eye on the Bingley widow?"

My spine prickled, and I stopped breathing, dying to know how he would answer. Of course, he would admit to no such thing, even if it were true... even if I longed for it to be true. Why would he expose himself to the contempt of a man he already despised just to claim an interest in a woman who was not his social equal? Even if he did nurse such a sentiment, no good could come from him confessing it.

"I do not profess to be worthy of Elizabeth Bingley," Fitzwilliam answered tightly. "But if I ever did win her for my bride, would you truly wish to have me as a brother-in-law? For I assure you, I would not suffer you to ruin that girl and again escape the demands of honor."

I do not remember anything after that. There were a few words about arrangements, a threat or two, then Fitzwilliam fairly chased Mr. Wickham from the alley so the rascal would not be there when Lydia came back. Then he gave a jerk of his hat, as if satisfied in a deed finally accomplished, and walked up the street. He never saw me, standing behind the door of the carriage, with my heart in my throat and my eyes full of tears.

He had done this for me! Bearing all the mortification of hunting down Mr. Wickham's debts, as though he were responsible for the man, and potentially opening the door to gossip about why the powerful Mr. Darcy would want to hush up and send away the winsome lieutenant—he had done it to protect my sister and others, and to please me! I was sure of it! If it had been merely the "right

thing to do," he would not have spoken about me as he had... but speak he did, and I was determined to say a few words of my own.

As soon as I could get him alone.

I did heed Richard's advice on one or two points over the next couple of weeks. Matters I had dreaded were finally settled to my satisfaction, and I felt, at last, I had the right to hold my head erect.

I fancy that Elizabeth might have perceived my angst while I was yet in the midst of making the arrangements, for so often that week I would look her way, my heart panging achingly against my ribs for what I thought I could not have, and she would reward me with an instant's smile. It was only the compassionate smile of a friend, but it was manna to me. Surely, she could not know how it encouraged me, inspired me to learn to be the man she deserved. Perhaps that shared glance mattered a good deal less to her, but to me, it was the ray of light I sorely craved.

We engaged in a few more chess battles, most of which I permitted her to win. It was worth it to see the wicked gleam in her eye as she flashed me that cheeky look of triumph. It was worth anything, just to bow my head over the same board, our hands nearly touching, the sweet smell of lavender water soothing me even as her quickness and ready humor exhilarated me. But it was only a shadow of what I really wanted from her. Another playful kiss... I would not have let such a chance pass me again without pulling her to my chest and showing her precisely what her previous kisses had wrought. But I had no such opportunity.

Christmastide was fast approaching when I came back to Netherfield one day, after having completed an obligation that had been too long in the waiting. The relief of that duty, slipping from my shoulders, nearly made me skip like a youth as I bounded through the front door. I looked for Elizabeth at once, but I was told she was out. Charles had gone to Longbourn for the afternoon—not much of a surprise, as he had failed to heed my cautions about falling in love with Jane Bennet.

Eventually, I joined Georgiana in her sitting room and watched her

paint. I never told her anything about my business in town that morning, because there was no need. She was starting to learn happiness again, and that was all I truly desired. These days, she is Countess de Tourney at the center of the London scene, but that afternoon, she was simply my sweet little sister once more, and that was enough.

So relaxed was I, and perfectly unaware of the hour, that I was ignorant of what was taking place downstairs. Later I learned that the servants were looking for me, but no one thought to search Georgiana's private rooms. I came down, whistling and straightening my coat, thinking Elizabeth would be returned by then, but I was rudely arrested on the stair by the sound of someone shouting my name from the drawing-room.

"Fitzwilliam Darcy and my daughter are formed for one another! Since their cradles, his mother and I planned their union. You have no decency if you could dream of pretending to such a lofty status. It cannot be borne—it shall not be!"

*Lady Catherine!* My blood turned to ice, and I gripped the banister to stumble down as fast as my clumsy feet could carry me. My aunt had always nursed some fantasy that I was engaged to my cousin Anne, though I had never encouraged her. And now, for some reason, she had come to Netherfield, thinking to stake her claim to me and warn Elizabeth off! She seemed to care little who might overhear because the halls of the house echoed with her contempt.

"Are you engaged to him?" my aunt thundered.

I was still racing across the entry hall, my boots skidding on the polished floors. I know the servants were gawking at me, and Heaven only knows what was said of me later, but I was in a blind panic to keep my aunt from destroying that which I had not yet built.

"No," I heard Elizabeth answer.

*Ten more steps. I could make it!*

"And will you promise me never to enter such an engagement?"

I streaked to the door, my chest heaving, but my fingers trembled, and I dared not touch the latch. Perhaps I would rather not hear Elizabeth's answer.

"I will make no promise of the kind. I am determined to act in a way that will constitute my own happiness, without regard to you or anyone so unconnected with me. And from my acquaintance with Mr. Darcy, I can readily state that he is not one to be worked upon for any motivations but his own, which are, in my experience, often in accord with mine."

She... she did not say she would never marry me! I placed a hand over my chest, trying to steady my hammering heart and slow my staggered breathing. Did she even imply that we... we might share the

same hopes? I swallowed one quavering breath, commanded myself to come together, and opened the door without knocking.

Elizabeth graced the center of the room, taking her stand in the middle of the rug so that Lady Catherine could neither force her into a seat nor back her into a corner. My aunt must have felt all the insolence of it, for she was pacing a horseshoe around Elizabeth as if seeking some way to physically intimidate her, and failing. She checked herself mid-stride upon my entry.

I do not like recounting much about the conversation that followed. All I will tell are the things that lasted from that moment—the things worth remembering. I remember how Elizabeth's cheeks warmed, and her eyes brightened when she saw me. It was not the look of a trapped animal sensing escape; more like a comrade in arms, hoisting the flag and cheering when I joined her. I remember her steady defiance of my aunt, her absolute unwavering refusal to capitulate and renounce me. How she never resorted to rudeness or hostility, as my aunt did, but swatted away Lady Catherine's complaints with humor and, as a last resort, utter boredom.

But what I remember the most, the thing that warmed my soul and made the whole sorry episode worth enduring, was that Elizabeth refused to leave me. Lady Catherine tried—oh, how she tried to dismiss my woman from my side! But Elizabeth only tilted her head with that brazen smile and asked me with those fine, expressive eyes whether I wished for her to go or stay. I smiled back.

She stayed.

My aunt might have been enraged, but I... I was bewitched.

I have never done anything by half measures.

When I returned to Netherfield that afternoon, I meant to find Fitzwilliam, wherever he was, and pin him against the wall with a kiss to make his hair stand on end. And then, I would let him have the honor of proposing, of course. If he still wanted to after that.

However, I had scarcely got my gloves off when a very fine carriage, splattered with a deal of mud from a long drive, pulled up at the door. It seems that my cousin Collins did not exaggerate when he described Lady Catherine as magnificent, imposing, or attentive. Nor did he overstate her potential Displeasure at the prospect of her nephew being ensnared by a “defiled temptress of no family or breeding.”

I have seldom been so insulted, but at the same time, so amused. She certainly put on a worthy performance, no doubt having worked herself into a bonafide lather all the way from Kent until the moment she swept up the steps to the house.

I had not spent the last year putting Caroline Bingley in her place for nothing. Nor is it in my nature to surrender when someone tries to intimidate me. I had learnt sarcasm and disinterested philosophy at my father’s knee, and though I was far from “disinterested” now, I managed to hold my own against Lady Termagant until Fitzwilliam found us.

The dear man was out of breath, with those bright blue eyes starting in horror when he burst through the drawing-room door that afternoon. What followed was a half-hour of near-obscenities from the most venerable and bluest-blooded occupant of the room, while Fitzwilliam and I bounded between indignation and awe-struck hilarity as we took in all the ridiculousness of it. He glanced at me often, and though the veins were standing out on his neck, his mouth frequently twitched in restrained laughter. I like to think I taught him that.

At one point, after the worst insults had flown, he came to stand beside me and his fingers, hidden behind his back, brushed mine in reassurance and gratitude. I would say that was the fateful moment when we both knew we were meant to wage life's battles side by side. Later, after the great lady harrumphed and threatened herself out the door, with the vow that I would never be received in polite society, I had a chance to make certain she was right. Who needs polite society when I have Fitzwilliam?

He started to apologize for his tyrannical aunt, and I tried to beg pardon for my buffoon of a cousin when at one point, he simply stopped us both. "What the devil are we bothering with them for?"

And then he grabbed me, rather like a ruffian, but a very *nice* ruffian, and kissed me until I was no better than a speechless rag doll in his arms. So, you see, it really was he who set us off in that way, despite his usual assertions. While I was still dazed and limp, I may or may not have caught my balance on his cravat and left it somewhat untidy. I am not sure what happened to the buttons on his waistcoat, but I am certain it was an accident. Just after that, Charles walked in.

Fitzwilliam set me back on my own two feet and declared that he had compromised my honor, or that I had compromised his, I cannot remember how he said it, and that we would have to marry by special license within a fortnight. I think Charles found that a stroke of brilliance, for the very next morning, I learned that he and Jane had been discovered in a delicate position and that they would have to join us at the altar. Caroline was, to state the least, unhappy.

The wedding came off charmingly, and in only ten days. My mother felt justly cheated for a second time because she had once again been swindled out of planning a lavish ceremony to celebrate the catching of a wealthy husband, but I had all the pleasure of triumph. For one thing, I won my bet with Fitzwilliam.

He still claims it a stalemate, for the original implication was that he would be duped into marrying one of my sisters, but I maintain that no such restrictions were placed. Jane was happily situated "by my means," and Fitzwilliam was similarly ensnared, so I claimed the forfeit. I shall not put down what I requested, for even I am not so irreverent as that, but I will state that he left me blushing for days afterward.

There was one final conversation, on the eve of our marriage, that I feel had some material influence on our future understanding and honest relations, so it would be a woeful oversight to leave it out. You see, we had never broached the subject of my first marriage, and I suppose any second husband secretly wishes to know how he stands in comparison with the first. In our case, his interest was doubly sensitive because of his affection for Andrew.



"I shall not attempt to replace him," Fitzwilliam said, a little tightly. I was, after all, reclining against his chest on the sofa, so he may have found it difficult to breathe.

"Why should I fear that?" I asked.

"Well... I thought... naturally, you would hold some memories secret in your heart."

I sat up and looked him in the eye. "My love, perhaps I should disabuse you of some misconceptions. Andrew was very ill when I married him."

"Yes," he said heavily. "I recall."

"And he was not over concerned with having an heir, for he meant everything to go to Charles."

Fitzwilliam gave me his suspicious look—the one he gets when he knows I have something up my sleeve. "Yes?"

"I was more nursemaid than wife. Indeed, I cared for him in his most humbling hours, so no one else could have... Well. I expect he thought one day we would be a proper couple and that he would have a helpmeet when his younger siblings all married, but it was not to be. I was fond of him and pleased to play my part in his family so he could be better at peace in his last days, but I did not love him as I do you."

He fell silent, staring at the fire. After a few moments, he put his arm back around me and drew my head to his shoulder, stroking my hair and occasionally kissing my temple as we gazed at the glowing hearth together. "I would not have been jealous of him," Fitzwilliam murmured at last, "but I cannot describe how I feel to hear you say that you have loved only me."

I threaded my fingers through that perfectly ordered mess of curls at the nape of his neck and leaned my cheek against his. "I used to say that I would only marry for the deepest love. I broke that promise to myself once, but I swore I would never do so again. And I did not. I shall love you with my last breath, Fitzwilliam Darcy."

My wife is perhaps the most thrillingly devious creature alive.

I finally caught her in the act of putting down her final words, in the hothouse of all places. Needless to say, I remain astonished at her calculating wiles. I thought she was only enjoying the smell of fresh flowers in the middle of winter, but now I discover that she has been secretly penning some rather shocking assertions about our courtship.

I confess myself intrigued that she knew or suspected many things that were either erroneous or rather too close to comfort. I never knew that she had overheard my words to George Wickham in the alley that day, but I was surprised to learn that she believed I had summoned my cousin to come handle the matter for me.

To this day, I had never divulged that Richard, whom she loves as a brother, had cautioned me against acting on my feelings for her. He may find a rather chilly reception when next he comes to Pemberley, but I trust she will forgive him when he offers to play and sing with her. I only thank God in Heaven that first impressions are not always correct, for if they were, my life would have been an empty one, indeed.

I close this final chapter in my journal with a heart full of pride and abiding joy. By the impertinent young lady from Hertfordshire, I was properly humbled in my youth, when a man is most willing to be corrected by a woman. I have now spent twenty years losing chess games, attempting to read to her with her head on my chest, and trying to keep up with her quick mind in conversation. This morning, we had the pleasure of playing with our first grandchild in the nursery, so it is safe to say we have found our harmony together.

I trust that the words we have written will find their way into the hands of future generations and that the proper measure of discernment will be applied in the reading of them. Though they are not in accord on all points, I believe the consistencies outweigh the

discrepancies. When I pointed out the passages where we were in disagreement, Elizabeth only laughed and declared, "My dear, in cases such as these, a good memory is unpardonable."

Whatever my loving wife has held forth, I will not decry as a falsehood. It would be safer to state that our memories and perceptions have been slightly impacted by the passage of time. I am not above claiming a near-perfect memory in all other matters, so perhaps I will leave it to the reader to determine whose version of our history is the most accurate. Elizabeth and I will, I do not doubt, continue to debate over the "facts" as we separately represented them and will probably never come to a satisfactory conclusion.

But it will be most agreeable to "argue" with her.

*Fitzwilliam Darcy*  
*29 January 1832*

## About the Author

*Short and satisfying romance for busy readers.*

Alix James is the pen name for popular Austenesque author [Nicole Clarkston](#).

Always on the go as a wife, mom, and small business owner, she rarely has time to read a whole novel. She loves coffee with the sunrise and being outdoors. When she does get free time, she likes to read, camp, dream up romantic adventures, and tries to avoid housework.

Each Alix James story is a clean Regency Variation of approximately 20,000 words.

Visit her website at [www.AlixJames.com](http://www.AlixJames.com)

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